

Birds of a Feather

Anti-Broadcast

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Summary

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Description:

He was the hero of prevailing peace. Then the hesitant King of Alexandria. Now, he was a reserved and calculating man, left to raise three girls all on his own. Trouble is looming with his daughter's growth. And the past is catching up. They all play a part, but now they must guess which one.

1. Echoes in the Universe

Birds of a Feather

Chapter One

The streets of Alexandria were drenched in long flowing silks of ashen gray and charcoal black. Shutters were drawn closed, curtains pinned tightly shut together. The cobblestoned alleyways that twisted through the lively kingdom were deserted and quiet. Not a child made a peep nor did a merchant cry out for the purchase of his wares. That overcast day was quiet and somber. As the silent morning drifted into an early afternoon, doors and windows began to open. People crowded, suddenly, out onto the streets, packed shoulder to shoulder, filing into the large courtyards. People scrambled across the thatched roofs of the city, gazing towards the castle. And again, the rustling of the large city quieted down and everyone pricked their ears finely. Some women wrung silk scarves in their hands. The men simply dug their hands into their pockets and watched the large ticking clock tower above.

The shrill brassy sound of trumpets began to ring out. Birds scattered and some children groaned and

covered their ears with their hands. At the gates of the castle and at the large man-made river surrounding the beautiful and well-manicured gardens, people crowded together and craned their necks. What a sight it was to behold; seeing the Royal Alexandrian Brass Band make their appearance in their flamboyantly lacy and golden tunics with crooked berets. They all stood at attention, side by side, with their shiny trumpets cocked at directly the same angle. Their sharp and confident toots bellowed out from the bell of the trumpet, mixing together a song of true regency with a hint of regret.

The grand doors of the castle creaked open and immediately, the people of Alexandria began to whisper and push a bit more, eager to see. Emerging at the top of the steps of the garden door for the castle was a man that the city of Alexandria had grown to respect. Though he had been the most different king they had, one who did things in a way people had never thought of before; they had come to appreciate him as the ruler and felt he had been a good choice of a partner for the miraculous queen of Alexandria. In the seven years since his marriage to the queen, he had helped procure formidable changes and established safety nets for lower-class

families— something he wished his own adoptive father could have had. At the loved king's side were two young girls, both slender and graceful despite only being four and six years old, respectively.

The six year old, who had just a few inches on her sister, had tanned skin that was clear and bright at her face. She had sweet blonde hair that was much more colorful than her own father's. It was thick and fell in lush curls down her back. Her eyes, however, were taken directly from her father's eye sockets, it seemed, and screwed into her head. Beside her, her younger sister had dark black hair. It was like the sanguid night sky, complete with gray streaks like a milky belt of stars extending across the horizon. Her skin was much more fair with an olive undertone. Her eyes were the color of coffee beans. When the two princesses stood side by side, some people found it hard to imagine they were sisters.

The two young girls were dressed in matching elaborate dresses that had multiple layers in the skirt despite their protests. Black tulle gave the girls bigger waists and the long lacy sleeves were itchy, but completely forgotten. Their small wiry bodies were so deflated. They looked totally and utterly heartbroken. They watched the trumpeteers work together to throw their sounds across the large and

spacious garden. As the trumpets faltered away, the little girls looked to their father for some sort of clue. But the king's face was entirely etched in a sorrow the girl's had never seen before. And in his arms he gripped the smallest of his three girls, holding her protectively against his chest.

She wasn't even a year old, but the beginning sprouts of soft golden curls were starting to cover her head. Her eyes were dark like her own mother's and peeping out beneath the edge of her lacy dress was a small tail. The only princess of Alexandria to inherit one.

The trumpets echoed across the still water, settling on the shoulders of the citizens who stared with wide eyes and discontent bellies. The family of three remained at the top of the tall stairs that descended into the garden while the Alexandrian Trumpeteers withdrew their berets, covering their hearts, as the sound of clattering tin and metal began to rise from the foliage. Leading the way was the most distinguished and regarded (not to mention, most fawned over) general of Alexandria, Beatrix. Alongside her, with a face of great concern and discontent, was her lover and husband, Aldebert Steiner, whose armor had been polished that morning despite the warnings of rain. The two

captains of Alexandria's soldier regiments marched forward while behind them, their loyal soldiers held a large decadent coffin on their shoulders, marching in time. One foot forward. Pause. Another foot forward. Pause. As eventually the somber coffin came to pass, the king of Alexandria finally collected himself and his daughters, heading down the stairs to follow in the wake of the casket. He ached in that moment as he realized he no longer had enough hands for his little family.

The king's long legs followed behind the coffin and with each step, he grew gravely worried he'd faint. It felt like all the blood was rushing through his brain, down his spine, and pooling into the bottom of his heart. He felt like he was losing his energy entirely too fast and his calloused hand gripped the pudgey thigh of his small daughter, relishing in the silky feeling of her skin. He glanced fleetingly to the small girls on either side of him. The oldest one grabbed his free hand, her slender fingers gripping him tightly. His middle child watched the soldiers as any means to amuse herself.

"At attention!" Beatrix's sharp but melodious voice rang out and the young girl's lifted their eyes at the familiar sound. Surrounding the royal family, dozens of soldiers hurriedly straightened their

shoulders and gripped the hilt of their swords. In front of them, the coffin was tenderly lowered just a few feet short of a hole. As the king stared in dismay at the hole, he, himself, almost felt like falling into it.

The queen was dead. Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII was no more. Behind the king, the trumpets began to wail again. Beatrix and Steiner directed their soldiers into neat rows. The king stopped processing everything long before. He watched the scenes unfurl in front of him as if he simply wasn't there. Everything was happening through a crystal glass to the king. Nothing seemed to process. It was as if not a thing had truly dawned on the rather lost and confused man. How could this be? When just one week before, Queen Garnet was healthy, sporting a pearly smile, and gracing the world with her good-nature; how could she be gone in the matter of days? Whatever illness had wiped across Alexandria had left just as quickly, taking the entire king's world with it. What was he to do now?

It began raining not too long later. The king couldn't help but think how fitting it was. The sky was unleashing his own mental turmoil down onto Gaia. The sounds of silk unfurled and the help of the castle promptly held umbrellas over the royal family,

but the little girl's hairstyles were already flattened and the baby was crying against the father's chest. His empty blue eyes, however, only laid on the freshly laid dirt that now was growing mushy.

Beatrix's chestnut brown curls were glossy in the steady downpour. Her boots clicked against the wet cobblestone and she grabbed Steiner's arms. "Have the maids take the girls." When the help circled around the king, he became acutely aware of the baby's fussiness and hurriedly, he wrapped his arms around her like the maids had ill-intentions. Beatrix gripped his shoulder from behind, startling him. "Zidane... maybe it would be best if the girl's went inside. Sarah doesn't need another ear infection."

King Zidane relinquished the girls in almost a defeated way, watching as they bobbed out of sight in the rain. Without his children around, he felt like his inner anguish and grief could be released. He fell to his knees, uncaring of soaking his slacks, and reached forward, placing his hands to the mound of dirt. He didn't care if his hands got dirty. Zidane trembled as he thought about how Garnet lay peacefully just feet below him, never to be unearthed again. He ducked his head, beads of rain rushing down his blond locks. Zidane ground his teeth together, everything around him forgotten.

Steiner's armor clattered as he came to stand beside the fallen king, holding an umbrella up as protection.

“Your Majesty...”

“Don't call me that, Steiner...” Zidane's voice croaked. He didn't move or even attempt to throw a glance in the captain's direction. Around the men, the dribbles of rain to leafs, fountains, and water surfaces rang out. Distantly, a frog croaked. Steiner stood with his hands poised behind his back, watching Zidane's crumpled figure comb the marshy dirt.

“Your Majesty, perhaps you'd like some lun—”

“I said, don't call me that!” Zidane's head snapped up and he looked over his shoulder at the captain who had grown to be his right hand man over the course of the half decade. Zidane's hands curled together with clumpy soil caught between his fingers. “I'm not a king. I never was.”

“I think Alexandria would say otherwise,” Beatrix appeared on the other side of the grave, slick droplets of rain running the length of her ivory silk cloak. The past decade had been good to the general and she gave her healthy and thick hair a curt flick over her shoulder. Zidane looked nearly exasperated

as he pressed his palms to his knees and wearily looked between Beatrix and Steiner.

“I’m no King without my Queen,” Zidane shook his head. “And now my daughter’s have no mother.”

Beatrix crouched down, lowering her head within Zidane’s meek tunnel of vision. “Everything is still really fresh. But I promise you, Zidane, that Steiner and I will be here for you every step of the way.” There was silence again as Zidane fell at a loss of what to say or even think. All of his thoughts were rumpled up like a carpet beneath a startled cat’s paws. Beatrix’s dark eyes glanced fleetingly towards her husband and she pensively licked her pink lips. ‘The people of Alexandria have always had to be strong,’ Beatrix continued. “And their faith in the crown has not wavered, Zidane.”

The young man pushed his mop of sopping blond hair from his face and looked at Beatrix with blue eyes that offered no sparkle. “Their faith never wavered in Dagger. Tell me, how much faith would you have in a fool like me takin’ the throne?”

It’s true in the seven year marriage Queen Garnet was the prominent public figure of the Alexandrian crown. Zidane was rather elusive at galas and town commemorations. But every year, the town insisted

on throwing a large ball in honor of Queen Garnet's birthday and Zidane always made an appearance beneath a lemony light to twirl and dance with the birthday girl. Zidane was a big help behind the scenes, though. On top of already being a marvelous and involved father, he read endless request after request to Garnet as they poured in from every type of organization, club, or even family in the town. He listened to all of Garnet's woes as a busy Queen and attended fundraising events and anything she said was important to her. With her gone, however, Zidane found himself rather exposed.

"Zidane, nobody expects you to spring into action. Not so soon, at least..." Beatrix told him. "You'll have time to mourn... time to figure things out with the girl's..."

Slowly, Zidane's head tilted down to the fresh grave that stung his just-as-fresh wounds. Cold raindrops ran over his skin and his hair, evoking goosebumps to pucker across his skin. He lowered his hands into the mushy mess of mud. "I'm nothing without her..." He whispered. "I'm nothing..."

Beatrix straightened up now, glancing towards the tall Steiner. Together, the captain and general watched the dazed king, who was at an utter loss as

to what to do. Eventually, Beatrix directed Steiner away, though the man continually glanced towards the broken down Zidane, watching until he disappeared from sight behind the foliage.

All alone, Zidane could only manage a wispy sigh.

Ten Years Later...

When Zidane opened his eyes, he was greeted by a familiar sight. An empty bed with silky sheets that gleamed in the early morning light. Every morning he awoke with the same desperate hope to see his beloved wife laying in bed beside him. He feverently wanted to wrap his arms around her, press her into him, and inhale her angelic scent. No matter how many days or years that passed, Zidane still felt like he could feel Dagger with him, offering her wise and balanced words and flashing that pearly grin at him. Zidane raked his hands through his fading blond hair and looked towards the french doors leading to the balcony. It was a beautiful day in Alexandria—and a special one.

He rolled out of bed and dressed quickly. He opted for a long sleeve white button-up with a black vest that he kept open. As he washed his face in the basin, he paused, looking toward his hand. Zidane's

gold wedding band glinted in the rays of sunshine that made its through the tall opaque windows of the royal bath. He smiled, fleetingly, when he remembered the day of their marriage. It seemed like an entirely different lifetime; a dream he only recalled in his deep sleep.

When Zidane emerged from the bathroom, the chamber maids were already dutifully at work. One maid grabbed his tangled sheets and ripped them from the large and fluffy mattress, tucking them into a wicker basket. She then began working on tucking fresh sheets on the bed. If it was up to Zidane, he wouldn't have any room service, but he was required to abide by the operations of the castle per Steiner and Beatrix's fine tuning. Another maid was busy sweeping the marble floors, another polishing the door knobs and wiping sudsy circles on the window panes. When they noticed the king, however, they all abruptly stopped their tasks, some even gasping sharply. They hurriedly bowed, clutching their dirty aprons in their hands. The holder of the throne, however, waved his hand dismissively. He had learned it was difficult to change the habits of those who had served beneath the crown their entire life. But Zidane was determined to be the easiest king to work with.

He stepped out from his bedroom, checking the grandfather clock perched near the wall of the wide hallway leading towards his chamber. It was barely after seven. Zidane was certain only his youngest was gathered at the breakfast table. Alex had always been an early riser. Already, though, Zidane's eyes fell on another early bird who fluttered around the castle long before day break, and without coffee, too. It was Beatrix, who had a long garland outstretched between her arms, which she was scrutinizing heavily, tenderly touching the light blue velvet bows. She did a double take, her chestnut curls bobbing on her shoulders, when she heard Zidane's boots to the polished marble floors.

"Zidane, oh thank goodness," The general sighed, drooping her soldiers. "What do you think of the bows? I just don't think they match the shade of Sarah's dress."

Zidane came to stand by Beatrix, who had grown to be one of his best friends and an extension of his own arms. She whole heartedly cared for the three princesses of Alexandria and still managed to keep Steiner and his rusty rag-tag clan in check amongst the grounds. The king tilted his head back and forth, his boyish sandy blond hair clawing across his forehead.

“Um... well... it’s blue,” Zidane shrugged.

Beatrix sighed, lowering the garland. “You’re just like Steiner. Yes, I know it’s blue, but is it *the* blue? Sarah turned away nearly a dozen designers before settling on her dress. I want to honor her choice closely.” Beatrix turned her head, admiring the velvet bows again.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Zidane shrugged, strolling past Beatrix now. He paused on a short flight of stairs, looking over his shoulder at the general whose anxiety about the situation had not been assuaged. “Sarah is the most flexible and understanding. It’s Alex you have to watch out for. She’s the most demanding princess in all of Gaia.”

Beatrix smiled, folding the garland up in her hands. “Oh, that reminds me. A maid told me in passing that Bella is complaining of a stomach ache.”

Zidane sighed, raking his hair from his clear but tired face. “I should’ve guessed, of all days.”

“Breakfast shall be served at eight.”

“Thank you, Beatrix!” Zidane shouted over his shoulder as he hurried off down the hallway,

mentally preparing himself to be a father and a king for yet another day.

Crossing the large and spacious Alexandrian castle to journey into the princess' quarters was equivalent of crossing mountains. Ten or fifteen years ago, spry and energetic Zidane could have easily conquered it all. But today, in his middle age, Zidane was already fatigued after the several flights of stairs and sharp right turns in winding corridors. He came upon the door that belonged to his middle child. Zidane curtly knocked on the door and entered without even waiting to be called in.

Zidane stumbled into a spacious room that was dark by nature. The tall sloping ceiling was covered in silk draperies that sported fun and dark designs. The windows were covered by black cotton. Candles were lit on every surface, dusty books and journals discarded on vanities, console tables, and across the floor on the darkly woven rugs the ruminating princess had demanded when she redecorated her chambers last summer. It smelled wickedly of burnt sugar, lavender, and potpourri. Zidane noticed a bowl of crushed up herbs on the cluttered vanity table. His daughter had been playing witch again. He spied her bed beneath a canopy of sheer black tulle that tumbled down to a large mountain of quilts. He

could see dark black hair and for a moment, he could pretend it was Dagger slipped beneath the covers. Zidane cleared his throat, carefully maneuvering around some opened books about the history of eidolons.

“Arabella?” Zidane asked, coming to the foot of the bed and grabbing the dark mahogany post. “Arabella, are you awake?”

Slowly, the dark purple sheets folded back to find a rather pale but upset looking teenager. Arabella resembled her mother closely. She had those sweet brown eyes and dark hair that was like an onyx fire reaching from her scalp. Her black hair was kept short, however, falling curly at her jaw. “Daddy, it’s rude to come into a witch’s room and call her by the incorrect name!”

Zidane sighed despite the grin plastered across his face. “Would a princess think the same?”

“Daddy,” The young girl looked at him pointedly. “I’m a witch before I’m a princess. Always.”

“So, Bella, a little birdy told me someone wasn’t feeling well,” Zidane came to sit on the edge of her bed. The wiry girl’s nightgown crumpled as she sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. Zidane

pressed his hand to her forehead and cheekbone. “You feel fine to me.”

“It’s not my head, it’s my stomach,” Bella told him without shaking the pouty look.

“Were you up eating those jelly beans and chocolate frogs your Aunt Freya brought back from Lindblum?” Zidane arched his eyebrows. Furiously, his middle child shook her head.

“Of course not!” Bella said. “Aunt Beatrix says chocolate frogs rot your teeth. Witches don’t have rotten teeth, Daddy.”

“And what about princesses?” Zidane grinned. Bella gave him a dead-panned look and he could only laugh at how much it looked like the exasperated face of Dagger. “Well, I’d say you’re perfectly healthy. Are you sure your belly’s not a little jealous of Sarah being the birthday girl today?”

“No,” Bella said defiantly, turning her head away and allowing her glossy black hair to frame her face. “I couldn’t care less that Sarah is sixteen today!”

“Well, then tell your belly to stop hurting because you have to attend the birthday ball. No if’s, and’s, or but’s, Missy,” Zidane told her, watching her face further etch with disappointment. “It’s going to be a

lot of fun, I promise, Bella. There will be lots of food, a live band— not to mention a lot of kids your age!”

Bella’s shoulders seemed to sag at the mention and she fell back against her fluffy goosedown pillows with a big melodramatic huff. “Daddy, none of those kids like talking to me. They think I’m weird and I know it.”

“Well, you did try turning Iboez Darner into a dragonfly at the last ball,” Zidane shrugged. “They don’t think you’re weird, Bella. You’re the second in line to the throne of Alexandria. I’d say they’re just nervous around you.”

Bella rolled her eyes, her black locks splaying across her large and fluffy pillows. After a moment, she grinned, her slender fingers picking at the dark embroideries stitched into the quilts. “People are scared of witches, right?”

“Arabella, it’s hard to be scared of a girl as cute as you.” He reached towards her, pinching her cheek. She howled in protest.

Bella leapt from her bed to the velvet stool of her vanity. She wobbled back and forth, her arms windmilling. Her silky nightgown swayed back and

forth around her slender legs as she reached for a bowl of flower petals and ash she had most likely stolen from the gardner's shed. She dug her fingers into the dusty mixture and held her hand out towards Zidane.

“You’ll forget you ever came in here,” Bella told him. Zidane did his best to conceal the smile that was slowly finding itself across his face. “And you’ll let me do whatever I want tonight!”

“Only if you go to Sarah’s birthday ball,” Zidane told her. “She’s never missed one of yours.”

Bella lowered the opaque bowl of ingredients. “As long as I get the last chocolate frog, I’ll go.”

Zidane nodded. “Deal. But first, breakfast.” Zidane came to his feet and wrapped his arms around Bella, who was just slightly taller than him when standing on a stool. “Oatmeal and raspberries sounds like the perfect cure for a stomachache.”

When Zidane was finally able to coax Bella down to the dining hall, it was a quarter to eight. The two came through the door to find the maids already running around wildly, ordering drapes to be pulled

down so new, freshly ironed drapes could be rehung. Butler's arranged wreaths and bouquets of flowers bursting with bright blues along the walls while another group of maids worked on pinning garlands with the velvet bows to the perimeter of the tall windows that allowed the fresh sunshine of Alexandria to fall into the well-polished room.

Zidane found his oldest and his youngest daughter seated at the long table. There was already a silver platter with an arrangement of fruit and cheeses set between them. Juice and tea were also available. Sarah had her wavy blonde locks pinned into a mountain a top her head, her ruby red house dress dipping low into a sweetheart neckline above her smooth tanned skin. Sarah delicately drank some tea, smiling at Alex, whose little tail beat against her back with excitement.

Sarah Til Alexandros-Tribal XVIII had always been a good big sister. She was attentive and polite, always willing to lend an ear. Though her younger sister, Bella, bore much more of a resemblance to their mother, Sarah truly captured the essence and spirit of Dagger's gentle and tender nature. Sarah was easy-going and especially patient with six year old Alexandra. Bella and Sarah were the likely culprits to butt heads. It was easy to see the younger

and darker sister was slightly jealous of her older sister, though Zidane insisted there was nothing to be jealous about. But still, it was evident Sarah cared for her younger sisters, no matter how much they drove her up the wall. On the day of her sixteenth birthday, Zidane saw nothing short of a budding woman who would make a fine queen to Alexandria one day. It astounded him in that moment that it had been sixteen years since he Dagger had given birth to their first child. And it almost made him nervous: Dagger's sixteenth birthday had changed everything.

Zidane came around the table while Bella sunk down into the seat beside Alex. Already bored, the young wishful witch reached for a grape, chewing on it slowly in an attempt to unravel the skin entirely from the fruit without swallowing it whole. Zidane leaned over the tall back of the dark chestnut chair, pecking a kiss on Sarah's forehead.

"Happy birthday, darling," Zidane said, grinning down at her bright face. "Sixteen, sixteen! Oh man, where do the years go? Soon enough I'm going to be a grumpy old man."

"You already are, Daddy!" Alex burst out with a girlish laugh and flushed cheeks. She was easily the female reincarnation of Zidane. She was the spitting

image of him in his youth with her chipmunk cheeks and endless energy. Not too mention her loud mouth that never told a lie. Zidane grinned amongst all of his girls, glancing towards the busy help that whirled around the castle in anticipation of the most important ball: The 16th birthday of the princess of Alexandria.

2. Lasting Legacies

Chapter Two

The evening sky was plastered in pinks, blues, and oranges; swirling together into one magnificent show. The beginning inklings of stars were starting to break through the daylit sky, bading the sun goodbye for yet another night. A fresh breeze came over Alexandria and the temperature was mild and fair; as if the entire universe knew tonight was special. Zidane had returned to his chambers as the afternoon waned on. He had resigned himself to sinking into the bath, his head tilted back and all the windows open with their magnificent view of the sprawling and growing kingdom. He sunk into the soapy water and sighed contently. He closed his eyes and allowed the fresh evening breeze to run over him. Zidane's mind had been buzzing all afternoon. He ran over every detail of the ball, trying to be sure he hadn't missed a thing. Had he made sure to tell the cooks about Regent Cid's new dietary restrictions? Lady Hilda would have Zidane's head if they allowed Cid to sneak meat back into his eating habits. Did he remind Beatrix about Alex

needing a bath? Did he have enough alcohol to please the Tantalus troupe?

His mind seemed to hush, however, when he glanced towards the large and curving marble countertops. His chamber and private bath hadn't changed much in ten years. Zidane only found himself in his room for quiet time, some much needed rest, or a luxurious bath. When he looked towards the counter, he saw a half empty bottle of perfume. It was Dagger's and smelled of the fresh lily ponds. Zidane hadn't the heart to throw it away. The decadent and curvy bottle glinted in the waning evening light. Zidane sighed, pressing his head to the edge of the tub. He ran his hand across the sudsy surface of the water. The way the water passed through his fingers; it was like he was watching the very essence of his life slip by. It had been years since he'd last seen Dagger. One day was already too much. He could almost marvel at the amazing aspect that he had managed to survive so long without her. In the weeks following her death, Zidane felt lower than he ever had— lower than the depths of Pandemonium. But the only things to keep his feet planted on the ground were his supportive friends and the marvelous gifts Dagger had left him: Sarah, Bella, and Alex.

The humid night air stuck to Dagger and Zidane's skin as they lounged on their balcony. The air smelled sickly sweet of budding flowers; vibrant poppies even found ways to sprout through the cracks of cobblestone alleys. The night time creatures howled and croaked. Zidane pressed a cigarette between his lips, an arm tucked behind his head, as he stared at the stars belting out before him. It had been eleven months since Zidane had taken the throne alongside Dagger. Though he still hadn't completely warmed up to the idea of being a king, he did enjoy the front row view of the sky every night. As a child growing up in the jammed packed Tantalus hideout in Lindblum, it had taken lots of climbing and leaping to find a comfortable spot to sit down and watch the stars. Here in Alexandria, he didn't have to try nearly as hard to find a view.

Zidane released a plume of smoke that drifted above his head. He cocked his eyes to the side to rest on his beautiful wife. Despite it being nearly a year since his return and betrothing to Dagger, in many ways, he still couldn't quite believe it. Some days, he wondered if he was still asleep somewhere deep in the twisted and knotted roots of the Iifa Tree. The milky moonlight bathed over her as she stretched out across her chaise lounger. Her silky nightgown

slipped between her slender legs and her small hands rest on the swollen belly that protruded from her thin frame. She felt his eyes and tilted her head towards him, her onyx black hair tumbling over her shoulder.

“What’cha thinking about?” Zidane asked, his cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. “About how beautiful you are, right?”

She rolled those dark eyes playfully, her pupils dancing like coffee mixing with milk. “I can’t stop thinking about the baby,” Dagger replied, tenderly running her hands along the curve in her belly. “My mind is running wild with all the possibilities. It could be just like you... or even me.”

Zidane laughed, nearly dropping his cigarette. “Well, there’s a good chance it will take after one of us.”

Dagger lifted her bright face to stare into the moonlight shedding down on them. Surrounding the queen and king, a night time orchestra rang out, announcing its presence far and wide. “I hope the baby is just like you,” Dagger said, her voice light with air. “I hope it’s fearless and brave and honorable...”

Zidane grinned, looking to the stars. “I hope it’s like you; optimistic and resilient.” They were quiet for a few moments, their minds wandering away to all the excitement the future seemed to be holding out towards them. “Boy or girl?” Zidane asked, turning his head. His blond hair fell across his forehead. Dagger was quiet.

“It doesn’t matter,” She shook her head. “As long as it’s healthy.”

“Well,” Zidane stretched in his chaise lounger, flicking his cigarette over the railing. He tucked his arms beneath his head again and smiled playfully at the sky. “I hope it’s a girl who looks like you and talks like you and thinks like you.”

Dagger grinned, running her fingers along her belly. “I think that will get tiring very quickly for you. Two of us against you?”

Zidane lifted his head, the milky moonlight of the night washing over him. His skin looked so smooth and bright. His eyes held the oceans in them. It was amazing to Dagger in that moment how beautiful Zidane was. Was beautiful the right way to describe a man? Dagger didn’t care. She gazed towards him, waxing and waning between a state of true bliss and total shock. The past few years of Dagger’s life had

been absolute chaos; total unpredictability. But finally, she realized in that moment, it had all been worth it. She had discovered who she really was— who she was meant to be—and she found someone who she thought she'd never know.

“Getting tired of you and a mini-you?” Zidane arched his eyebrows. “That could never happen! Even if there were three of you! Or even four of you!”

Dagger smiled and closed her eyes, letting out a content sigh. “Careful what you wish for...”

A knock on Zidane’s bathroom door had him shooting up straight in the tub. The water wobbled dangerously back and forth, threatening to spill all over the floor. Zidane raked his sopping wet hair from his face, blinking towards the door like a deer in the headlights.

“Yes?” Zidane called, leaning across the edge of the tub and desperately trying to swat at a fresh towel. It was just out of reach from the tip of his fingers and he ground his teeth together. His tail beat against his back in near frustration. Finally, his hand managed to snag the towel down and he staggered from the bathtub. “Come in!”

The door flew open as Zidane secured his towel around his hips. He grabbed another towel, furiously rubbing at his fading blond hair on top of his head. He looked over his shoulder to see Beatrix, who had her arms full with several garments of clothes. She paused, arching her eyebrows, when she felt the steam of the hot water meet her skin. Immediately, Beatrix's cheeks lit up like a pot over a roaring fire.

“Z... Zidane! You didn’t tell me you were taking a bath! I could have waited outside for you.”

“What’d you think I was doing in here?” Zidane smirked, glancing to her in the mirror. He ran his fingers through his boyishly layered hair, flicking it across his forehead.

“I would have hoped shaving that prickly mess off your jaw,” Beatrix said, crossing towards the tall windows that overlooked the far east edge of Alexandria. Carefully, she laid a crisp white button up, a blue bow-tie, a black vest, and a matching coat out along the table.

Zidane laughed, dabbing some cologne along his neck. His chin was starting to get a little like a cactus. But he would hope he’d be given leniency between trying to be a king and father. Besides, when Zidane looked in the mirror, he completely

overlooked the growing in facial hair. All he could see was a man who no longer got a decent nights sleep or ever thought about what used to occupy his mind. He glanced over his shoulder at Beatrix. “Is that my outfit?”

“Just out of the press,” Beatrix grinned. ‘Look what I had made for you.’ She reached for the silky blue bow-tie that gleamed in the pink evening light. She held it out towards the king who tenderly took it into his hand, running his finger over the texture of the fabric. “I had the seamstress make it for you from the leftover scraps of Sarah’s dress.”

Zidane sighed and smiled, his eyes locked on the long strip of fabric. He pursed his lips, running his tongue along the edge of his front teeth. “Can you believe it, Beatrix? Sarah’s *sixteen*. Seems like just yesterday... Dagger was holdin’ her for the first time ever,” Zidane’s eyes tore away from the bowtie. The General of Alexandria looked to him patiently. She could tell the weight of the world was on the man’s shoulders. “Dagger’s sixteenth birthday changed everything, Beatrix.”

“Sarah’s sixteenth birthday will be nothing like Her Majesty’s,” Beatrix told him, smoothing Zidane’s coat and shirt out with an absent mind.

‘Things were very different all those years ago, Zidane.’ The king was quiet, prompting the general to glance over her shoulder at him. He was staring at his reflection again. Beatrix didn’t like the way Zidane looked at himself. “Are you concerned?”

Zidane blinked rapidly, as if he was returning to Gaia. He shook his head and rolled his shoulders, reaching for his shirt. Slowly, he shrugged into it and began fumbling with the buttons. “No. I’m not concerned.”

Once Zidane was dressed and refreshed, he hurried on to the sitting room where the princess’ were ordered to wait as the guests filed in and the ball could begin. When he entered the room, he glanced towards the skylights on the slanted high-vaulted ceilings. The stars had entirely broken through the daylight now, a pale moon emerging behind some clouds. When Zidane entered, he came upon Bella, who was sunk down on the floor with her nose stuck in a book.

Bella had chosen a black silk dress with one strap that reached over her wiry shoulder. It was hemmed with bright red thread that glinted in the candlelight.

The skirt was nice and full with the petticoat beneath and Zidane could only imagine the fuss she put up to the maid who was tasked with dressing her. Bella had a black headband placed in her hair to hold her bangs back. Zidane windmilled his arms, the velvet bag in his hand rocking back and forth. Bella's dark eyes looked up from her book.

“Bella, I nearly stepped on your dress,” Zidane reached his hand down, helping his daughter to her feet. He grinned, gingerly brushing some lint from her dress and floofing the skirt. ‘You look wonderful.’ Bella grinned up at him and his heart nearly melted. Gingerly, his hand reached forward, grazing her jaw. “Beautiful, just like your mother. And a book worm like her, too.”

Bella’s cheeks grew rosy and she thumbed through a few dusty pages of the book she had. Zidane knew she had ventured to the far back end of the library, to the section the scholars all strayed away from now. “Auntie Eiko is coming. I want her to see I’ve been doing my research about eidolons. The more I show my brains off, the more she is willing to tell me!”

Zidane laughed. “So, you’ll be a mage now? What happened to your witch dreams?”

Bella snapped the book shut, producing a cloud of dust. “I can be both.”

“A witch mage, eh?” Zidane wrapped his arm around Bella’s shoulders, directing her further into the sitting room with him. “I think you’d be the best there ever was.”

Together, the two strolled through a stone archway, entering the back end of the sitting room. This room was decorated with many old paintings done by nobles. Some showed Alexandria at different points in time, some so old the castle didn’t pierce the sky high amongst the city scape. There were some smaller paintings of past kings and queens, as well. In the center of the room, plush furniture formed a circle around a coffee table that was cluttered with jelly beans, chocolate frogs, puddings, and even mints carved to look like flowers. Alex, with her bulbous pink cheeks, was munching away on a chocolate frog, rather uncarefully above her dress. She was dressed in bright yellow and gold fabrics that gleamed beneath the chandeliers light. The torso was embroidered with light green vines and the tulle skirt fluffed out around her, making her seem small, dainty, and graceful.

Standing at the wall length windows, watching Alexandria darken, was the birthday girl. Sarah's sweet sandy blond hair had been curled meticulously. Her hair looked like the finest thread as it fell in luxurious waves around her slim neck. Half of her hair had been swept into a pile at the crown of her head. Her dress was nothing short of magnificent. It was strapless and a royal blue with gold thread running along the sweetheart neckline, down the torso, and accentuating her hips and waist. The skirt jutted out wide and full, making her seem so delicate and petite. She was an absolute angel. Zidane had no doubts she would serve the throne well when it was finally his time to step down.

Sarah heard her father's boots and looked towards him with her bright refreshing eyes. They were almost the same color as the dress she chose. Sarah grinned, her pearly teeth bright despite the waning sunlight. Outside, the bugs were beginning to chirp and sing in celebration. Sarah folded her hands together in front of herself, gazing towards her father. Zidane stared at his daughter, a lifetime of memories seeping through him. The frame of his body nearly shook and his hands clamped down on the velvet bag in his hands.

“Tonight, you’re sixteen,” Zidane’s voice was soft as he stepped towards her near the windows. Sarah smiled faintly, watching her father with excited eyes. “But you’re always going to be my little girl.” Zidane took in a deep breath, shifting the weight back and forth between his boots. He slowly undid the bow around the velvet bag, reaching in and withdrawing a silver crown that was molded to look like crawling vines, crusted with beautiful emeralds that gleamed from every facet. Tenderly he held the crown in his hand, extending it out to Sarah, who was frozen, staring at it in wonder. Zidane turned the jewellery in his palm, his heart beating ferociously in his chest. He could see flashes of Dagger whizzing by his eyes. The countless numbers of birthdays she had worn it to, freshly polished and adorning her head.

“This was your mother’s,” Zidane told her, smiling gently. “She wore it on her sixteenth birthday. And every one of her birthday’s after that. Nothing would make your mother happier than for you and your sister’s to each wear it on your sixteenth birthdays.”

Carefully, Zidane lowered the crown into Sarah’s hands. “This was... Mommy’s?” She arched her

eyebrows. Zidane nodded. “I believe I remember it... but... it’s been so long, Daddy.”

“I know,” Zidane smiled, almost woefully. He stepped forward, tucking a loose lock of Sarah’s hair behind her ear. ‘It’s been way too long. Here, let’s put it on and see how it looks.’ Zidane lowered the crown to fit around Sarah’s head, fluffing at her tall and voluminous hair. As Zidane straightened the chains and gently combed through her hair, he couldn’t help but remember all the evening he would do this for Dagger. She’d turn the help away simply to relish in the feeling of Zidane’s fingers whisking through her inky strands. Zidane gazed down at Sarah now as she wore the crown. Tenderly, his hands curled around her shoulders. “Perfect,” His voice was soft. “Absolutely perfect.”

The sound of tin rang out behind Bella and she turned towards the door. Alex perked up in her seat, wiping away the crumbs of her treats.

“Hi, Uncle Rusty!”

The captain grinned in a friendly manner towards the nine year old princess but Zidane could already imagine the earful he would get later that evening about ‘watching his mouth’ around the young and impressionable princesses. In the moment, however,

Zidane could only smile with deviously arched eyebrows.

“Regent Cid, Lady Hilda, and Lady Eiko shall be docking any moment. Then we can present the birthday girl.”

Zidane gave Sarah’s shoulder a squeeze. “Great. It’s showtime.”

3. The Garden Party

Chapter Three

The cicadas chirped and the birds stirred in the tree branches. The long hazy clouds of the night drifted through the sanguid sky, revealing clusters of stars and partly obscuring the large moons that were destined to collide. It was a beautiful mild night. The help of the castle propped every window and door open that they could possibly find. The most noble of people who flocked from all over the Mist Continent were dressed in their best. Women were bathed in jewels and silks. Men were adorned in the best textiles and finest wools. Cigar smoke rose from the crowds, the sounds of clinking glasses ringing out. Champagne and wine flowed freely, earning howls of laughter and excitement from the crowds. The gardens surrounding the castle twinkled as the celebration raged on.

Zidane found himself with his own drink, adjusting his stuffy bow-tie, as he stood in the large cobblestoned plaza outside of the garden. Distantly, beyond the hedges, he could hear the lapping waves of the river surrounding the property. Behind him,

Dagger's gravestone gleamed, freshly polished, and decorated in recently cut mums and hyacinths. Zidane glanced amongst all the guests. It was all just an exciting sea of unfamiliar faces. He was glad people were as happy as he was to have a daughter like Sarah. He spied his daughter on the steps leading towards the water. Behind her, the castle grew far and large out of sight, glinting with all its power and mysterious magic. A crowd of friends surrounded her, the outskirts populated by boys. Zidane could almost laugh from behind his drink. Hopeless boys, just like he used to be. Sarah was busy fawning over her dress with some noble girls wearing floppy sunhats adorned in lace. She wasn't paying the boys an inkling of attention.

Princess Alex was all the rage amongst the older attendees of the party. They pinched her red cheeks and happily gave her little candies and treats to watch her dark eyes light up. They cooed over her tail and her impish actions and they were puddles at her mere smile. Zidane grinned watching his youngest daughter wrap everyone around her little pinky. He took a sip of his drink, pleading internally for the alcohol to do something to take his mind off things. All he could focus on was the fact that Dagger wasn't beside him. She always so dutifully

attended to the cake, hovering over the bakery chefs with a fine artistic eye, double checking the shades of buttercream and ensuring the diameter of the cake was absolutely perfect. He missed having her beside him to greet patrons and citizens. He missed her polite laugh and her dainty hello's and the way she offered her slender hand out to guests. As Zidane tilted his head back to take another swig, he was rammed from behind, nearly taking him off his feet. His drink splashed over the edge, splattering across the cobblestone. Annoyed, he looked over his shoulder, but that all melted away as he laid eyes on a familiar face.

“Watch where you’re going, Your Majesty,” The red headed man said, his smile never faltering. “You’re one royal klutz.”

Zidane grinned. “I could have you beheaded right now if I wanted to.”

“Most little girls gets magicians at their birthday parties. I’d like to see a beheading at a teenage girl’s party at least once in my life. Then I can die happy.”

Another man appeared beside Zidane, a gleaming black bandana fixed over his head. “I’ve got Your Majesty another drink,” He said, holding a glass out towards Zidane.

“Thanks, Marcus,” Zidane gladly accepted it.
“Thanks for comin’, also. Both of you.”

“Like we’d miss this?” Marcus smiled, his sharp fangs glinting in the moonlight. “Where’s the birthday girl?”

“Over there,” Zidane pointed. Sarah and her girl friends were now fawning over someone’s pearl necklace and bracelet set. “Havin’ a good time, it looks like.”

“You know,” Blank shook his head. “It still blows my mind daily that you’re a dad. I never would have imagined it in a million years.”

“But being king is so much easier to believe?” Marcus nearly rolled his eyes.

“Hey, which would you believe first?” Blank shot back.

“Neither!” Marcus replied with a laugh, slugging Zidane playfully in the arm all the while.

Bella hated to admit she was a jealous creature, especially about anything in regards to her sister’s. The moment the girl’s had been announced down the

stairs, Alex had been swept up in a sea of fawning grandmothers and Sarah had been taken away by fashionable teenagers her age, dressed to the hilt, and gussying up to the first in line to the throne of Alexandria. Bella had what she liked to call Middle Child Syndrome. It was much easier to admire the oldest and coo over the youngest. But the middle child? What purpose could they possibly serve? Bella was the dark version of her sister's with pasty skin. How dearly Bella wished some days she could sprout blonde hair and blink blue eyes. She had studied numerous witchcraft books and had failed to procure a spell to change her eye color.

There was one special person who did not overlook the middle child, however. There was one person who acknowledged her much more than her own sisters. And that was the heir to the throne of Lindblum, Lady Eiko. For the last ten years of Eiko's life, she had adapted to a life in Lindblum. For many weeks following Zidane's return, she had finally lifted from a serious slump in her life. Eiko took Zidane's death the hardest of anyone. She had cried heavily, full heartedly, what Ruby would quote as "ugly cryin'", at every gathering in the months and years following Zidane's disappearance. But his return and even his marriage to Dagger had

reportedly sent Eiko's spirits flying. Since then, she had grown refined in the position of Princess. It's like what she always wanted. Eiko never gave up on her people or her heritage, however. And when Bella had turned six, Eiko felt something about her—something Sarah was not. Or even Alex, proven years later too. Arabella was the last and newest generation of the people of Madain Sari. She had the gift. But she had no idea.

Bella was much too young to truly understand. For Zidane, he knew she may have been thrilled to learn she could summon eidolons. But his true worries laid in safety. It was a great power to have. Eiko took her under her wing, however, and taught her history and ethics on the world of eidolons and summoners. Doctor Tot commended all of Bella's essays in tutoring sessions when she recalled the past of Madain Sari. She simply thought they were all lectures on world history— very vital for a princess to know. But it had been catered to her because Eiko knew she had the gift.

That night, Eiko arrived beside the gallant and cocky looking Regent Cid. On his arm dangled delicate Lady Hilda, the tulle of her intricate party hat wafting in front of her face. Eiko had allowed her hair to grow out. But she braided and coiled it at

the crown of her head. Typically her head was adorned in gold or pink hair clips. She was wearing a long straight black dinner gown with a sheer shawl that glittered in the night time. As usual, her hair was confined intricately atop her head, wisps of purple hair framing her face. Her bright smile came through when the girls descended the stairs, but she only enveloped Bella into her arms.

“I would like to talk to you alone sometime soon,” Eiko told Bella quietly, still holding the young girl against her. “I think there’s something important that must be said now that you’re thirteen and a half, Arabella—”

“—*Bella*—”

“Please, listen,” Eiko sighed, ground her teeth together to keep her frustration at bay. “All of this I want to speak to you about...” Eiko drew Bella back by her shoulders, staring intently at the teenager. “It’s also about your mother.”

Zidane had told the girls dozens and dozens of stories about their mother. He had one for everything. And he made it seem like they had been to all corners of the world and beyond together. Somedays, Bella wondered if her father’s story wasn’t sauced up to illicit dreamy mystical thoughts

towards the girls. She knew her mother was a strong woman, a powerful mage. What more was there to know?

“I have a special place I can take you in the castle,” Eiko whispered, a huge grin coming across her face. “Someplace I know you’ve never been.”

“Impossible,” Bella told her defiantly. “I’ve been in every room in this castle.”

Eiko smiled. “No, you haven’t. Meet me at the corridor that leads to your father’s royal chambers at a half past nine.”

Beatrix sighed, leaning forward against a marble balustrade on the outskirts of the garden party. The water was relaxing. Several guests dipped their toes in. The atmosphere was excited and optimistic. Things had been on the rise. Tenderly, her eyes flicked back and forth in a reserved manner. She then took a drink of champagne from a flute glass. The party was shaping up to be fun and promising. Zidane had managed to do it again. The man who continued to iterate that Dagger was the much better candidate for the job was thriving miraculously in ruling a country. Many nights, Steiner suffered

through heavy teasing from Beatrix about his past doubt and hate for Zidane. That monkey thief turned out to be the only saving grace Alexandria could count on. The world truly was an odd place.

A group of laughing young people entered the area, goofily knocking shoulders against each other. Beatrix spied the birthday girl between them in her glamarous dress. Beatrix's heart melted at the sight of Dagger's hair piece placed in Sarah's combed hair. What a nearly miraculous thing to live through again, Beatrix thought. She felt she was lucky to have attended a second sixteenth birthday of a princess in Alexandria. She arched her eyebrows and took a sip of champagne. What general could attest to that in the whole of Gaia?

Still the ever attentive babysitter, Beatrix cocked her head, following the group of teenagers, contained of stuffy aristocrats dressed in gaudy fabrics that made them seem much older than they actually were. The girls held their sunhats at their side now, unashamedly sporting their brunette hair. And the men had opened their vest to catch the cool evening breeze between their arms. They were headed towards the steps of the river but paused when they spied a cluster of people already doing

what they intended. Sarah and her friends looked amongst each other.

In that moment, Beatrix's eyes were stung with a guard standing nearby. Beatrix paused a beat before she merely shrugged. A second passed before the guards sprung forward, ordering the guests up and personally dragging them out of the way. Beatrix watched as Sarah's eyes followed the people leaving. She looked rather amazed. Or maybe bewildered? But still, the teenagers sunk down on the stoop, gazing up at the stars and laughing and talking quietly with each other.

Beatrix watched with keen interest as Sarah spoke closely to a boy with tan skin that gleamed like almond butter beneath the moonlight. He had dark brown locks that rolled across the top of his head. Pointy ears careened out from the side. And he had bright eyes that seemed to capture the princess. Sarah's slender fingers slipped through his as she spoke to him. Beatrix grinned before she straightened up, wandering away from the balustrade.

The moonlight wavered back and forth over the surface of the river. Zidane found himself alone, hiding amongst the shadows. He was seated on the stairs, a drink beside him and a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Behind him, hoots, hollars, and music rang out amongst the party as the night waned on. With all the drinks that had been consumed, did anyone remember they were celebrating Sarah's sixteenth birthday? Slowly, Zidane took a drag of his cigarette, the end lighting up like a cherry. He sighed, the smoke drifting away from his nose. He tilted his head back to take a drink but paused when he heard the jangling of chains on a coat. Zidane lowered his drink, watching the rivers surface ripple as the foot steps came closer. Long slender legs dipped down the stairs beside him and he turned his head to see a curtain of silky ashen white hair tumbling out beneath a tan leather hat.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” Came a voice as smooth as silk.

Zidane grinned crookedly, casting his eyes forward. “You of all people callin’ me that just sounds wrong.” He took a sip of his drink. “How’ve you been, Freya?”

The Burmecian was quiet for a moment, smoothing her long coat out along her thighs. She sighed and shrugged. “What’s the point of even keeping track anymore?” The two old friends were quiet, relishing beneath the band of stars with their own drinks. Curiously, Freya peered her eyes beneath the brim of her hat. “Did you put this entire party together on your own?”

“No,” Zidane shook his head, wrapping his arms around his knees. His cigarette threatened to fall out of his mouth. “Beatrix did majority of it.”

Freya smiled, taking a sip of her drink. “Should have guessed. The attention to detail was much too meticulous for your eyes.”

“I thought blue only came in one shade,” Zidane shrugged, earning a light hearted chuckle from Freya. She hadn’t changed much at all. Still the reserved, quiet, and humble young woman she always had been; the one with a broken heart that still held itself together. The last ten years for Freya had been rather turbulent. She was a woman who had the weight of a nation on her shoulders and she had been seen as the glue to bring the crumbling Burmecians back together. Sir Fratley was at her side from time to time. But things had never been

the same. Freya, however, was not easily disheartened. Many days when Zidane thought of her, he considered her to be much stronger than he was.

“I hope Alex thanked you for those jelly beans,” Zidane said, tapping some ash off his cigarette. “She ticked her sister’s off when she ate all of them. Dagger would be pissed if she knew I was rottin’ those girl’s teeth out.”

Freya smiled, her silver hair drifting back and forth in the gentle spring breeze. “I haven’t seen young Alex quite yet. I saw Bella, however, with Eiko. It’s almost shocking how much she looks like her mother. It’s surreal, Zidane.”

Zidane raked his hair from his face, smiling despite the consistent dripping of blood from his panged heart. “Tell me about it. Still, though... I can’t look at any of them without thinking about her.” He carelessly flicked his cigarette into the water and hunched his shoulders for a moment. “I always wonder how different the girls would be if she were here.”

Freya tilted her back, her crystal glass glinting in the bright moonlight. “It’s best you don’t go down that rabbit hole. Take it from me.”

The two were quiet for a few moments. Behind them, howls of excitement rang out. Zidane couldn't help himself—he lit another cigarette, bobbing his knee. "Time passes too fast."

"Tell me about it."

Bella's flats clacked against the spiraling marble staircases. The sounds of the birthday ball began to die away as she wandered back up the stairs of the castle. Instead of turning right after entering the wide hallway leading towards the private chambers, she turned left, heading in the direction of her father's bedroom. The young girl's inky black hair swished back and forth against her slender neck. Her curiosity had been peaked by her Aunt Eiko. Perhaps she would receive something nice despite it being Sarah's birthday. Luckily, few guards roamed the inside of the castle. Most of the festivities were taking place down below.

Bella came through a door, leading towards yet another long hallway. At the very end, she would find her father's bedroom. The torches lining the walls cast wicked shadows that licked up and down across the stone ceiling. The full moon shine

brightly through the windows. A hand reached out from behind, touching Bella and making her gasp sharply.

“It’s just me, silly,” Eiko’s bright blue eyes glowed as she stepped out from a shadowed doorway. She grinned and reached her arm out. Her sheer shawl tumbled over her wiry shoulder as she pushed a door open, revealing a spiral staircase accented with marble statues carved to look like knights. “Have you ever been up this way?”

Bella’s big round brown eyes gazed curiously all around the tall slender tower. She leaned in through the doorway and a slight chill came over her. Bella hugged herself at the elbows, tilting her head back to look at the somewhat eerie marble statues. Her short black hair gleamed in the moonlight that pierced down from the rafters. She shook her head, glancing towards Eiko. “I’ve never been up here. Beatrix says it’s nothing of importance. Just guard balconies.”

Eiko grinned, her eyes following the winding staircases. She seemed so young with giddy excitement in that moment, as if she was six years old all over again on that fateful night. Eiko reached forward, grabbing Bella’s hand and towing her after her. “You probably think it’s odd I’m taking you up

here during your sister's birthday ball. Your sister's birthday, though, is very close to the first time I came up here."

Bella looked towards Eiko, whose purple wisps of hair bounced with each step they took side by side up the stairs. "You came here with my mother?"

"Has Doctor Tot told you of the Plight of Alexandria?" Eiko asked.

"Yes, of course," Bella nodded, remembering her studies quite well. "Mommy and Daddy were there."

"And so was I," Eiko told her. "Your mother and I were on this balcony up here."

Bella paused on a landing. Eiko leapt up a few more stairs, as light as an angel on her feet. She stopped, however, peering over her angular shoulder. Bella glanced down the direction they had come from. They were so high up, it was nearly disorienting.

"Why are you taking me up here?"

Eiko smiled, nearly maternally. She came down the steps to the landing slowly, her black heels clacking loudly and echoing all around them. Eiko reached out, firmly planting her hands on Bella's

shoulders. “There’s something special about you, Bella. Something about you that your sister’s don’t have.”

Bella’s heart fluttered at the idea. Being the middle child often had the thirteen year old girl feeling rather invisible with a shadow cast over her. Her father had always been so mindful of it, but for Bella, it was too obvious Sarah was the most important as next in line and Alex was the cutest princess to grace the lands. The prospect of Bella having something special about her had her heart soaring.

“I do...?” Bella was hesitant, guarded with her feelings. “What is it?”

“We have to get to the top of this tower,” Eiko grinned. “Come on!”

Bella’s face lightened at the idea, her mind wandering wild about what could possibly set her apart. Something Alex nor Sarah could ever do—Bella wanted to know what. Hurriedly, she slipped past Eiko and began leading them up the stairs. Her long black skirt swished back and forth, her olive tanned arms held out from her sides as she careened from step to step, her flats padding softly against the cracked stone. Eiko watched as the young girl made

her progress up the steps with great wonder, her brown eyes scanning up the tall tower. Eiko could only see Dagger in that moment and her heart panged when she thought back on all those years ago; memories lost in the wind.

Finally, the tall oak door came into view and Bella pressed her hand to the iron latch, watching as Eiko came up the last few steps. Bella grinned widely with her flushed cheeks and pushed the door open, staggering back out into the night time. It was quiet up there. Stretching out before Bella was a large half-circle balcony. The view was most likely tremendous at the railing, but there seemed to be nothing of interest to the young princess. Bella looked all around, glancing up at the sky littered in stars.

“So, what’s special about up here?” Bella asked, wandering a few paces and stopping again.

“I have something for you,” Eiko’s smile had yet to falter from her bright face.

“But it’s Sarah’s birthday,” Bella’s bold brows knitted together. “Auntie Eiko, why are you spoiling me like this?”

Eiko's blue eyes were cast down for a moment, shifting her weight back and forth. Slowly, she came towards Bella with distinct steps that echoed across the large open space. Bella tilted her head back, her eyes never tearing away from Eiko's. Eiko grabbed Bella's hands, lifting them up.

"There's something I have to know, Arabella," Eiko's voice was not above a whisper. 'It's very important to me. And I know it would have been important to your mother, as well.' Eiko reached towards her waist where a small velvet bag was secured. There was the sound of rocks clanking together as Eiko withdrew two shards of a gem that had been broken apart and barred jagged edges. "These used to belong to your mother."

"What are they?" Bella's brown eyes grew as wide as saucers. She tenderly gripped Eiko's wrists, examining the glinting shards.

"They're very powerful gems. Your mother had two pieces of it and I had the other two," Eiko explained. She felt as if Dagger's reflection was coming out from between the many different facets. "If you put them together, they call forth Alexander."

Bella looked rather surprised. She had been doing her homework like Doctor Tot asked and remembered a night she had stayed much too late reading through a book of summons. The candlelight on her night stand flickered as she had pressed her hand against the drawing of the mighty wings of Alexander. Eiko pushed them towards her and the young girl arched her eyebrows.

“Take them into your hands.”

“But why?” Bella asked. “Doctor Tot said summon stones are not toys.”

“Trust me,” Eiko smiled, grabbing Bella’s hand and unfurling it. Gently, she shook the shards into Bella’s hands and immediately, the young girl felt a rush of energy as if someone had injected coffee straight into her veins. Bella looked to Eiko with a face etched in shock and a bit of nerves. And in the next moment, the entire castle shuddered, making Bella’s heart nearly leap from her chest. The young princess whirled around, a sharp gasp hitching up her throat. It had been nothing but a simple empty balcony with a view of the stars just moments before. But now, growing directly in front of Bella’s eyes, were staircases, balustrades, and stone archways. The castle groaned and hawed. For a

moment, Bella was certain the entire structure would crumble under such a massive move. But the castle remained steady as the staircase came together piece by piece. Bella's mouth had fallen agape. She nearly dropped all the jewels cluttered in her hands. Slowly, she came towards the new piece of architecture, stunned.

Eiko squealed with giddy delight, flying to Bella's side and grabbing her arms. "I knew it, Arabella. I knew it!"

"Knew what...?" The princess was still reeling. Part of her could not believe what she witnessed and she thought for sure she had fallen asleep in the lounge room before the party had started. Upon pinching herself, however, she found herself still staring at the miraculous architecture.

"Arabella, you're a summoner," Eiko cupped her cheek, directing Bella's confused eyes towards her. "My horn told me so. And it was right. You're just like me. You're just like your mother."

"All those books Doctor Tot had me read..." Bella's eyebrows knit together in greater confusion and she strolled towards the stairs, reaching out to touch the railing just to be sure it was real. It was easy to tell it had not completely sunk in on the

princess yet. "... About Bahumaut and Leviathan and Shiva... are you telling me I have the power to control them?"

"Yes," Eiko nodded vigorously, clasping her hands together in true delight. "You're the next living generation of Madain Sari, Bella. You inherited your mother's gift."

Slowly, Bella turned her head to follow the curve of stairs leading up high and proud towards the star-littered sky. Bella didn't know much about her mother. She briefly remembered short illuminations and memories of her in her mind. Bella knew she looked very similar to her mother while her sister's took more after their father. In that moment, however, she felt a maternal warmth she had never experienced as her fingers curled around the shards and she stared up the beckoning stairs.

"What's up there?" Bella asked.

Eiko smiled, almost sadly, as her bright blue eyes followed the curving railing. "A different lifetime."

Down below, the party was carrying on just as lively as before. A crowd had formed in the plaza

before the river that was decorated in varying shades of blue banners that dangled from tree branches and hedges, floating in the gentle night's breeze. A brass and string band played in the corner a beautiful waltz that had people clapping and humming along. Several partners danced in dizzying circles around each other. The women's full skirts brushed against everyone as the men faithfully lead them across the brick.

Zidane found himself on the outskirts, as usual. The once energetic and eager young man had grown into a reserved and calculating ruler. He stood with Alex at his side, who was quite tired from all the attention. She had her arms wrapped around Zidane's legs, her head tilted against his hip. Zidane gently combed through her hair as he watched the dancing couples whiz past them.

Hooting and hollering rose from the crowd in the next moment and Zidane tilted his head. A tan boy with dark locks and pointy ears emerged from the crowd. He was dressed in a crisp suit with a gleaming silky tie. And his hands were locked with Sarah, whose cheeks were flushed and rosy. She was smiling rather nervously, glancing around at the shouting crowd. The boy lead them onto the dance floor and they assumed their position before falling

in with the swaying couples. Zidane watched as the boy spoke lowly to his daughter, who cracked up into giggles and coy head drops. Zidane couldn't help but smile, watching as the boy gracefully spun Sarah around the dance floor. The other couples began to notice and quickly vacated the floor so the heir of Alexandria could have it to herself. Zidane watched as his little girl fell into the steps, losing herself in this boy. In a way, Zidane was watching him and Dagger on the floor again, bathed beneath the milky moonlight, blind to everything except each other.

But all those thoughts dissipated when the music abruptly halted. A shudder erupted and many people looked between each other, murmering and whispering. Zidane's head snapped towards the castle, gazing high towards the crystal that pointed to the sky. The balcony was rising. It hadn't been activated in over seventeen years. A purple light gleamed from the top of the castle and just as quickly, the noise died away and all became silent again.

"Daddy, what was that?" Alex asked, her big tired eyes gazing towards the sky.

Zidane could only stare, though, despite knowing exactly what it was.

4. The Highest Point of Alexandria

Chapter Four

The party had faltered into a relatively awkward silence. All eyes were on the castle that had grown still again. Zidane knew people were unaware of what they were looking at. The Alexandrian Castle was so massive, it would be hard to notice the edition of the illusive balcony, even if anyone at the party had been present for the Plight of Alexandria. Zidane glanced towards the still crowd, his eyes landing on Sarah who seemed rather concerned and slightly embarrassed. Already, Beatrix was looking at Zidane. He nodded to her and she left her flute glass behind on a pedestal. Zidane set his own drink down and began to leave the plaza, but stopped abruptly, turning to Steiner.

The look on Steiner's face said it all. He was only thinking about Dagger. For so many years of Steiner's career, he took on the responsibility of caring for the young dark haired girl. He had joined the Knights of Pluto only two and a half years after Dagger had been found on that beach, and despite

not knowing she wasn't the true Princess Garnet, he had dedicated himself to protecting her at all costs. With her gone, Steiner had obviously lost a portion of himself, but he dutifully attended to the three girls of the castle.

"Steiner, get the party going again," Zidane told him. But his brown eyes continued only looking upward. 'Hey, Steiner, did you hear me?' Zidane came closer to him. "Get the music going again." Finally, the captain looked to him, giving the king a firm nod.

When Zidane turned back towards Beatrix, Freya was already at her side, a serious look on her face. Zidane knew there would be no coaxing Freya out of this. The Burmecian was strong willed and always willing to hop into action. Zidane nodded to both of his companions, walking with brisk purpose. Behind him, Steiner's armor rattled as he rushed over to the band, encouraging them to strike up the tunes again. Zidane felt a force race against him, however, wrapping itself around his legs. When he looked down, he was face to face with large puppy dog eyes framed with loose blonde curls.

"Daddy, where are you going?" She asked, seemingly nervous about the idea of being left alone

in a sea of strangers. “Can I go?”

Zidane combed his hands through her bouncy curls, glancing towards his awaiting crew. “No, Princess. I need you to stay here and cheer your sister on while she dances.”

“But where’s Bella?” Zidane could detect Alex’s growing anxiety in her voice. She detested being left alone. Her father pursed his lips. His own anxiety was already beginning to ricochete around his body. Every moment he was unaware of what was happening atop the kingdom, the more tense he grew. Zidane’s hand fell from Alex’s hair, curling around her shoulder.

“I know where she is, don’t worry,” Zidane told her as confidentially as possible.

“But Daddy—”

“Hey, Princess Alex,” Blank appeared at Zidane’s side in the next moment with a wide grin. Zidane almost sighed audibly. “You wanna be the first one to taste the ice cream?” Alex’s fears seemed to evaporate in that moment and Blank reached forward, grabbing hold of her hand. Zidane watched Alex’s small slender hand lock around Blank’s and

he made eye contact with the man who was the closest semblance of a brother he had.

“I owe you,” Zidane said, lowly.

“There are many demands I can make of a king,” Blank grinned, leading Alex away.

Bella climbed the stairs with great enthusiasm, Eiko right on her heels. The older summoner was smiling as the air grew colder with each climb in height. The noises of the party couldn’t be heard. Bella had practically forgotten it was Sarah’s sixteenth birthday. Instead, the young girl’s eyes stared intently forward, her feet carrying her with total ease as she followed a gentle curve in the rather miraculous stairs. The fresh nights breeze raced through Bella’s short inky hair and she held her arms out at her side as finally, she emerged onto the top balcony that was a large half-circle.

The air was even stronger on top of the open balcony. Bella grinned into the chilly air, taking in a deep breath. The air filled her skirt up like a large plume and she spun around, uncaring of growing cold beneath the breeze. Bella twirled about, racing to the railing. Far and wide, Alexandria twinkled,

reaching the far edges of the cliff that abruptly fell off into a dark pit of a forest. It was so beautiful. Bella had never been up so high before, it was nearly dizzying. Bella's dark eyes lit up, however.

"This view!" Bella gasped. She looked over her shoulder at Eiko, who smiled as the wisps of her purple hair pressed to the frame of her face. "If it was daytime, I could probably see Lindblum!" Eiko didn't have time to respond. Bella's eyes fell to the side and grew ever larger and she wandered away from the railing as if the view didn't matter anymore. Eiko watched carefully as the young princess walked towards the large architecture that defined the center of the castle. Bella reached her hand out, touching the smooth and cold stone, staring just beyond the support.

Eiko almost felt the electricity of that fateful night over seventeen years before. She could hear Dagger's shallow pants and almost detect the new Queen's frazzled thoughts. Eiko glanced towards the balcony beneath her, tugging her skirt out of the way. She expected it to snap in half. But everything remained calm, only the sounds of the howling wind rushing past her. Bella finally looked over her shoulder towards Eiko.

“What is this crystal?” Bella asked. “I’ve always noticed it from afar but... it looks so different up close. Almost like... it’s talking to me.”

“What is it saying?” Eiko shook the past away from her and came to stand behind Bella.

“It’s singing,” Cautiously, a small smile twitched at Bella’s face. She was so tempted to reach out and touch it. “It has the same melody my mother used to hum to me when my belly was upset.”

Eiko pressed her hands firmly to Bella’s shoulders from behind. “I think you know the words, Arabella.” Bella only shook her head, however, her dark hair brushing against Eiko’s knuckles. Eiko bent over, her head hovering besides Bella’s. “You do. Just start singing...”

The tower sent a chill over Zidane as he lead the group towards the stone staircases. Zidane rarely came here. In fact, he probably would not have noticed if it had magically disappeared from the castle. Zidane cocked his head back, looking towards the statues of the stoic knights. A shiver crept down his spine but a warm hand gripped his shoulder in the next moment.

“Freya and I can always go alone,” Beatrix told him. “It looked like Alex wanted your company, anyway.”

“No,” Zidane shook his head, his eyes following each step. Distantly, he could almost hear the clack of those red leather boots to the stone. ‘I know Bella is up here.’ Zidane looked over his shoulder at the still Freya and Beatrix. “Bella knows.”

Freya kept her shoulders straight, gazing up the tall tower. “I’m assuming Eiko’s with her.”

“No one else would have known,” Zidane replied. His hands curled into fists as he began up the first flight of stairs. What began as a simple evening, somewhat melancholy over Dagger’s missed presence, had transformed into a night in which the stinging pain of her absence shot through all his limbs, claiming his nerves. It dawned on him in that moment, as he continued to turn sharply right, that it had been quite a long time since Dagger had last dashed up those stairs in a frantic hurry for her kingdom. It’s like he could hear that sharp roar of Bahumaut again, taunting him; reminding Zidane he couldn’t do a thing to protect Dagger. Zidane ground his teeth together, focusing more on his

steps. Behind him, Beatrix's sword bounced on her hips, the chains of Freya's coat clacking together.

"Zidane," Freya's clear voice rang out as they continued up the unforgiving stairs. "What did you mean by 'Bella knows'?"

Zidane paused on a landing and the two women following him abruptly stopped and waited patiently for the king who seemed to be in utter turmoil. Slowly, Zidane turned to Freya. It was amazing how even after seventeen years, Freya still recognized this man. He was so foolish two decades ago, carelessly chasing after girls and stuffing goods into his pockets. Now, he was a well-respected king and a totally different person who had discovered his true origins. But beneath it all, Freya saw Zidane for who he really was. And she felt she understood him well, through every muscle tightening and every frown.

"Bella has Dagger's gifts," Zidane said, slowly and calculated, his tense eyes looking between Beatrix and Freya.

Freya tilted her head back, her blue eyes piercing Zidane's. "She's a summoner." There was silence, only confirming her assumptions. "How long have you known?"

Zidane shook his head, his blond hair rustling against his head. “Dagger knew the day she was born.”

“And you never said anything?”

“Freya,” Zidane looked to her, quite seriously. “I had every intention of telling her myself. You have to understand—”

“Do you hear that?” Beatrix interjected, lifting her hand up. Slowly, all of their heads tilted upwards. Voices were echoing down the tower, bouncing off the walls. The hair on Zidane’s neck stood up. Zidane took off without another word. “Zidane!”

The shouts behind him were all lost, however. Zidane pumped his arms back and forth, leaping over stairs, uncaring of holding his breath steady. He had to lay eyes on Bella immediately. He knew Beatrix and Freya weren’t far behind. They could run just as fast as he could— maybe even faster. But their footsteps carried just behind him as Zidane continued up the stairs. He nearly tripped, but he caught himself, propelling forward to the final door. When he emerged into the cool night, he came to a stop, his shoulders rising and falling. Beatrix and Freya emerged behind him.

“The balcony...” Freya came forth, admiring the architecture.

“It hasn’t been activated since the Plight of Alexandria,” Beatrix said.

Dagger... Zidane could feel the night beginning to creep back over him. It haunted him. He could only blame himself for how badly things went that night. If he hadn’t gone to Treno, if he hadn’t been so wrapped up in his emotions... but again, Zidane held his face firm and walked forward briskly, pressing his boot to the first step. The sounds of the howling wind and sing-songy voices drifted away from him. He could only hear the carnage of summons against each other, the sounds of cackling fire. His nerves were pricked as he recalled the noises of crumbling stone, every second counting as he bounded up the stairs with a flag line secured to his belt loop.

“Go, Zidane,” Beatrix appeared beside him.
“We’ll stay here.”

Zidane’s heart was hammering in his chest. He couldn’t even manage of a nod of acknowledgement to Beatrix. With all his might, he forced himself up the stairs. The stairs to him were pure doom. The thoughts of wondering if he could save Dagger and

Eiko in time bounced through his skull. He walked stiffly, following the curve in the magnificent architecture without noticing a thing. Above him, that familiar song beckoned to him. Zidane could almost believe, briefly, that Dagger would be waiting for him at the top of those stairs with her dazzling smile. He could nearly break down at the very thought. But Zidane pushed forward, leaving the sights of Freya and Beatrix who stared after him longingly.

Zidane looked out over the railing, spying his kingdom nestled between the jagged mountains. Each light gleamed faithfully at him. The world around him was dark, just like it had been that awful night. The king had to force himself forward as the voices grew louder. His mind played tricks on him, overlaying Dagger's voice with the sweet words he had grown too familiar with. Zidane's hands were curled tightly into fists as, finally, the end of the stairs came into view. Slowly, he placed his feet to the solid balcony, half-expecting it to break into pieces and tumble into the darkness below. But instead, he was greeted by a different sight.

Bella and Eiko stood near the strong crystal that provided support to the castle. Their hands were joined together and they faced each other. Bella's

face looked so bright and joyful as she sang along with Eiko, as if she had known the words her entire life. In that moment, Zidane couldn't help but think how much Bella reflected her mother. The shape of her face, her nose, her eyes, and even her mouth... she was a living clone of Dagger. And the melody slipping out between her lips were only testaments to that. Zidane had to blink tears back as his presence became known. Bella's eyes lit up and she pulled away from Eiko with pure excitement.

“Daddy!” Bella raced towards Zidane, wrapping her arms around his waist. Weakly, he wrapped his arms around her, relieved to lay his eyes on her. ‘Daddy, I’m a summoner! Just like Mother was! I don’t have to be a witch! I can really be a mage!’ Bella rambled on quickly. “Why haven’t you ever taken me up here? I heard Mother singing, I swear! Auntie Eiko heard it, too!”

Zidane smiled at Bella before looking towards Eiko. The two only stared at each other, the muscles of their face not twitching in any direction. Gently, Zidane combed his hand through Bella’s dark locks. “Beatrix is waiting below for you. I think it’s time for your bath.”

“No!” Bella shook her head, gazing up at her father. “I want to stay up here a little longer. The party is still happening. I saw it down below!”

“Arabella—”

“—*Bella*—”

“I’m asking you nicely,” Zidane said, doing his best to keep his nerves in line. “Please go with Beatrix.”

Slowly, Bella detached from Zidane, looking between the two adults on the balcony. The wind howled, pushing her hair against the frame of her face. “Will I ever get to come back up here again?” She asked with a face that was already pained to know the answer. “Daddy, I *heard* Mother up here! It’s the first time I’ve heard her voice in ten years!”

Zidane pursed his lips together. “Beatrix is waiting.”

Bella was obviously upset. Her whole body locked up beneath her decadent gown and she looked fiercely at her father. She had a barrage of words beating at her lips but she remained silent, casting a final look to Eiko and the horizon, before she lifted her skirt and began to descend the stairs. Zidane turned, watching his displeased daughter go.

He let out a long sigh, turning his attention back to the balcony. Slowly, Zidane walked around, taking in every detail that had escaped him over the past decade. He ran his hands along the smooth stone and settled to watching the horizon with its blinking stars. Zidane cast a look over his shoulder at the slender Eiko, whose eyes were trained towards Bella's departure.

"Why didn't you talk to me first?" Zidane asked, his voice lacking rhythm.

Eiko cocked her head at him, her big blue eyes serious. "And say what, exactly?"

Zidane turned towards the unexpected princess, straightening his shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to make an executive decision over me and tell *my daughter* she's a summoner?!" Zidane drew his lips together but only for a moment. "Eiko, I was going to tell her."

"Oh, and when was that going to be?" Eiko asked, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've known since I was old enough to talk. She's thirteen, Zidane!"

"Don't you think I wanted to tell her sooner?!" Zidane came towards Eiko, his emotions fluctuating

wildly within his veins. “Did you stop to consider that maybe I was at a loss on how to tell Bella she’s the last generation of Madain Sari?!”

Eiko was quiet for a moment as she straightened herself out. “I’m sorry if you feel like I jumped you, Zidane, but I’m not sorry for telling Arabella the truth.”

“Eidolons are dangerous, Eiko.”

“No they aren’t,” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Yes, they are—”

“You’re only saying that because you’re still scared by what happened!” Eiko exploded, throwing her arms out at her side. “You don’t want to admit it, Zidane, but Garland and Kuja and everything else that happened still has a grasp on you! You never let it go!”

“So, what, you’re tellin’ me I should *forget*?!” Zidane’s face was only inches from Eiko’s now, his blue eyes intense, his cheeks flushed. “I should just toss it all into the wind like none of it ever mattered?! We played directly into their hands, Eiko. You, of all people, should understand! You almost *died* so some greedy monster could have your

eidolons! Now you're telling me I should just let my daughter harness these powers?!"

"Under my guide and Doctor Tot's watchful eye, she will make a fine mage," Eiko tilted her head upwards defiantly. "I'm insulted you don't trust me, Zidane."

Zidane shook his head and wandered a few paces, placing his hands on his hips. "It's not you that I don't trust, Eiko... don't say things to me like that."

"Then what don't you trust?" Eiko asked.

Zidane tilted his head up to look at the stars clustered in the sky. He let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head and closing his eyes. "You know who I am, Eiko."

"It's not who you are—"

"But it is," Zidane looked to her tensely. 'It will always be apart of me. And I can't tell you what it's capable of because even I don't know.' Zidane's arms hung at his side now and they held eye contact. "Don't you think it's better not to tempt fate?"

Eiko approached him slowly, her lips drawn back in a tight line. "When has fate ever stopped us from doing what's right, Zidane?" And with that, she

turned curtly, her heels beating against the balcony as she showed herself out. Zidane could only heave another sigh, coming back to the railing. Sarah's blue dress was so noticeable, even from so far above. He could see her spinning gracefully, still clutched in the arms of the tanned boy. Zidane sunk against the railing in utter defeat.

Dagger, I need you...

5. Receding Waves

Chapter Five

The next morning when Zidane emerged from the bathroom, he found no chamber maids furiously scrubbing his windows and smoothing his silky sheets out. He knew quite the mess must have been left behind in the garden, so all hands were on deck. He headed down to the dining hall. He felt there were many words he needed to exchange with his daughters. Sarah needed to be asked how she enjoyed her party. Alex needed to come clean on how many treats she swindled out from the citizens of Alexandria and especially her Uncle Blank, who had quite the soft spot for her. As Zidane closed the door behind him, he paused in the quiet hallway. Only the sound of the cackling torches could be heard. He could almost sigh as he tried to envision the many ways his chat with Bella could go. The last thing he wanted to do was come down in an authoritative way on her. But he was completely at a loss on how to tactfully speak to her about this. He knew Bella was excited because she finally had found a link to her mother and a way to define herself from her sister's. Zidane felt like the bad guy

every which way he looked at it. But his anxiety and his senses tingled at the idea of Bella harnessing summons for herself. Though Zidane viewed Dagger as the strongest woman he knew, he couldn't allow Bella to go through the same transformative events. All he wanted for his daughter's were to be carefree princesses.

When he arrived to the dining hall, the tall velvet curtains had all been pushed aside, bathing the sparkling room in the fresh sunlight of Alexandria. Zidane was surprised, however, to find only Sarah sitting at the long dining table. She was busy drinking her juice, her head propped up in her hand. Her blonde hair had been allowed free that morning and glistened from a fresh washing. She was dressed comfortably that morning in a long flowing white cotton gown that had intricate silky embroideries following the torso. Zidane smiled when he saw her drenched in the sunlight. She was so beautiful with her clear face. So unsuspecting and modest just like her mother was.

“Hey, you,” Zidane greeted as he rolled the sleeves of his white button up. Sarah perked up at the sound of her father’s voice. ‘Did I catch you off guard?’ Zidane grinned, coming to lean against the back of the chair beside Sarah. Sarah’s cheeks

burned hot and she smiled rather sheepishly.
“What’s that look for? What’d I interrupt?”

“It’s nothing,” Sarah shook her head, still smiling all the while. Zidane scraped the chair back, easing himself down beside her.

“Did you have a nice party?” Zidane asked, setting his elbows on his knees. “Beatrix told me you had quite the social circle.”

“Oh, was Beatrix watching me?” Sarah nearly knocked her orange juice over at the thought, but shook her head to catch a grip. ‘What a silly question. Beatrix is the most attentive woman I know. I think she has eyes in the back of her head.’ Sarah cleared her throat, nervously folding and pressing her linen napkin. “Yes, it was just a group of friends from Treno, that’s all.”

Zidane raked his hair back from his face, pressing his back to the tall oak chair. He claimed a grape for himself and twirled it in his fingers for a moment before peaking towards his daughter, who had her blue eyes cast down at her fidgeting hands. “I know you probably don’t want me to ask—”

“Yes, please don’t,” Sarah said evenly, looking at her father now. “Because even I don’t know how I

feel about it, Daddy.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Zidane asked, popping another grape into his mouth. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve done anything remotely close to dating, but maybe I can help you.”

“You?” Sarah arched her eyebrows, a smile spreading across her face. “Help me with boys?”

“I’d like to think I’ve got a special touch,” Zidane grinned. “I tricked your mom into marrying me, didn’t I?” Sarah’s eyes softened at the mention of her mother, but her smile never faltered. Sarah shifted back and forth in her chair before settling down, her slender fingers grazing the crystal tumbler of orange juice set before her.

“His name is Dante,” Sarah said, throwing a fleeting glance towards Zidane. He could tell she was doing her best to mask her giddiness, but he simply knew her too well. ‘He’s not from Treno, though, like the rest of them were. He lives here in Alexandria.’ Again, Sarah’s fingers began to play with her linen napkin, turning it around and around beneath her touch. “His father owns a shoe store and his mother sews all the moccasins they sell by hand.”

“What do you like about him?” Zidane asked, popping a cube of cheese into his mouth. It seemed so odd to be asking Sarah these questions, but he always knew this day was bound to come. In many ways, Zidane wished he could shield his daughter’s from the world of boys. He didn’t like to think of anybody making gooey remarks towards them and whispering sweet nothings. Zidane didn’t have enough fingers to count the amount of father’s he pissed off back in his youth. Now, he could only sympathize and silently say he was sorry.

Sarah contemplated the question, tilting her chin upwards. “He’s just very sweet,” Sarah turned towards her father, folding her hands into her lap in her polite and reserved manner. “He talks to me like I’m the most normal person in the world, Daddy. He doesn’t make me feel like a princess and I like that. And... I think I need that. It makes me feel more grounded.”

“Will you see him again?”

Sarah seemed surprised by the question, arching her bold brows. She took her time to think. She drank her orange juice and folded her napkin neatly into a triangle before she coyly looked at her father. “Maybe. If you’ll allow it.”

“Only if you allow it,” Zidane told her.

Sarah straightened her shoulders. “I get to decide?”

Zidane grinned, reaching out and squeezing her slender wrist. “One day, you’ll be queen. And you’ll have to decide for yourself every day what kind of queen you want to be.”

Sarah pursed her lips together for a moment. “I always want to be myself, Daddy.”

Zidane found himself wandering into the front foyer of the castle not long after his chat with Sarah. She obviously had a lot going on in her mind for a freshly sixteen year old girl. When he came through the archway from the dining hall, he saw Beatrix, who was knelt down beside Alex. Alex had dragged her entire collection of Royal Action Figures out, arranged in lines on the freshly polished floor. Carefully, the nine year old placed her Alexandrian soldiers in fine neat lines facing Lindblum soldiers. When Beatrix saw Zidane, she swiftly came to her feet. Zidane grinned as he watched Alex carefully handle the doll that was meant to be Steiner. Cautiously, she lowered the captain towards the back

of the line, extending his arm outwards with his silver sword equipped.

“Have you seen Arabella?” Zidane asked, looking to the general. “I haven’t seen her all morning.”

“I believe she’s in the library,” Beatrix told him. “You just missed her. She passed through not too long ago.”

“Status report on her mood?” Zidane arched his eyebrows.

“She seemed fine,” Beatrix shrugged. “Certainly not as tense as last night when I sent her to bed.”

Zidane placed his hands on his hips, glancing to Alex who was much too preoccupied with her toys to be paying attention. “Well, she’s just like her mother: a silent brooder. I’ll go find her. Make sure this one eats her breakfast before noon, please.”

“I’m not hungry!” Alex declared, adjusting the arms of her General Beatrix figure.

“Well, kiddo, you just sold your Uncle Blank out. Now I know you were given too many sweets last night,” Zidane smiled, crossing his arms over his chest. Alex cast a pouty look his way. Zidane sighed

and knelt down. “Don’t give me those eyes, Alex. I don’t want all of your teeth to fall out.”

Alex grabbed another Alexandrian soldier from Squad Beatrix from the small wooden box she had that was delicately and painstakingly painted to have budding roses along the lid. She placed the soldier into their stance and then lined it up with the rest of her unfurling war scene. “Uncle Blank says chocolate is good for me.”

“Yeah, well, your Uncle Blank is a liar,” Zidane smiled, reaching out to give her a curt pat on the head. He then stood and nodded to Beatrix, heading for the stairs that lead down towards the library, where there was always a slight chill.

It steadily grew quieter with each descending step. It was like entering catacombs or crypts. It was amazing how just fifteen feet beneath the marble slabs of the Alexandrian Castle foundation created such an affect of drowning the entire world out above. Zidane was greeted by the familiar sight of elderly men in long flowing velvet robes. The crest of Alexandria faithfully waved back and forth on their chests as their eyes skimmed over pages and their wrinkly hands stacked book upon book. Tall golden stands were placed throughout the long and

seemingly endless library aisles and waxy candles melted away, casting a flickering shadow across several forgotten spines. The first scholar to notice him bowed lowly for him, extending a friendly hand out to the king.

“Your Majesty, welcome... What a pleasant surprise,” The scholar smoothed his robes tenderly. “Might I assist you with something?”

“Did Princess Arabella come through here?” Zidane asked, cocking his head towards the man’s wrinkled face. The scholar smiled politely.

“Ah, yes, yes,” The scholar nodded. “She asked to be directed towards the Summoning Books in the back. Just follow the red carpet runner here. You should find her in one of the aisles. Princess Arabella should be back there.”

“Thank you,” Zidane said, his eyes already wandering between the aisles of tightly packed bookshelves. He walked slowly, the thick carpet runners muting his heavy black boots. Cautiously, he tilted his head between every nook and cranny, his eyes combing over the several scholars he saw. He found Bella secluded, all the way in the complete back of the library. She had a woolen black coat crumpled over her wiry shoulders to fight off the

rather dank cold of the underground library. She looked up, blinking rapidly. Several dying candles circled her. She sat on a stack of boots, her thin legs dangling off another hefty stack. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you all morning.”

Bella heaved a sigh, eyeing her father beneath her bold brows. “You act like it’s a crime to not eat breakfast.”

“It should be,” Zidane shrugged, plopping down criss cross beside his daughter who was much taller when placed on a pillar of books. He glanced to the spine of her reading material. *The History of Madain Sari, Volume 2, Expanded.* Zidane lowered his eyes for a moment. “I wanted to talk to you, Arabella.”

“For the last time, it’s Bella,” She sighed.

Zidane took a dusty book into his hands, fingering the spine with its gold etchings. He arched his eyebrows, thumbing through the crumbly book. “Your mother loved the name Arabella,” Zidane looked at the rather annoyed teenager. “I think she’d call you Arabella every chance she had.”

Bella kept her nose tilted down as she read her book. Zidane could tell by her body language that she was frustrated and upset and most likely wildly

confused. He pursed his lips, watching as she was slow to find her words. “I think Mother would have respected what I wanted to be called.”

Zidane heaved a sigh and closed his book with a heavy thunk. He discarded it beside him and reached towards his daughter, gripping her arm. “Put the book down, Bella. Please.”

Bella was slow to obey. He watched her dark eyes contemplate all her options before she shut her book with a bit of indignation in the flow of her actions. She set the book aside and drew her lips into a thin line, folding her hands into her lap. She was just like her mother, Zidane thought. Bella was much too clever and stubborn for her own good, just as Dagger had been.

“I think you’re mad at me,” Zidane began softly. ‘And I’m not going to pretend to not have a clue, Bella.’ He settled his back against the jam packed bookshelves that recounted the entire universe’s history of Summons, Magic, and Tricks. He inhaled deeply, the smell of aged parchment reaching his nose. “I want you to understand that I was going to tell you, Bella.”

Bella’s eyes were cast forward, watching the shadows dance across the spines of the books. She

pressed herself into the bookcase, stubbornly refusing to look at her father. “When? Why would you hide it from me? It’s the only link I have left to Mother.”

Zidane pursed his lips before he reached out and pressed his hand over Bella’s much smaller one. “That’s not true. You have me and your sisters. *We’re* your link.”

“What’s so bad about being a Summoner?” Bella looked to him now, her black hair framing her face. He could see she was conflicted, stewing about in her mind. “Auntie Eiko seemed so proud. Why aren’t you?”

“It’s not that I’m not proud,” Zidane did his best to withhold any exasperation in his voice. “I just want you to understand the true past of Summoners. They’ve endured so many hardships and faced so many troubles. I don’t want you to think I’m disappointed in you, Bella. I *know* you could be a great Summoner, just like your Mother was. You’ve got her spirit in you. I just... I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Hurt by what?” Bella’s eyebrows folded together.

Zidane squeezed Bella's hand and he tilted his head back against the bookshelf. The memories of his lifetime raced by in his mind. He could see the happiest moments; embracing Dagger when he thought all hope was lost. Grabbing hold of his friend's hands. Racing the clock with each other. The worst ones came by, too; people slipping through his grip, coming to terms with who he was... and who Dagger was meant to be. No matter how much time passed, the memories danced in front of him like it all happened the night before in some bizarre dream. Finally, he looked back to his daughter.

"I'm going to talk to Doctor Tot," Zidane told her. "I think it's time your education got more serious, Bella."

Bella wanted to remain tucked in the shadows of the library. On Zidane's way out, he snagged a thick book, a piece of parchment, a jar of ink, and a long feather. Precariously, he balanced it all in his arms as he made his way back up the stairs and emerged into the front foyer of the castle. Some maids were busy tending to statues that they polished with great finesse. Other maids pruned the tall elephant ear

leaves that sprouted from wide clay pots. Alex and Beatrix were gone when Zidane appeared from the library with his supplies, but her Royal Action Figures remained in position, scattered about at the base of the stairs. They looked so small and insignificant in the grandiose foyer that had tall vaulted marble ceilings, allowing the morning light to bleed in and drench the castle. The maids bowed to Zidane as he passed but were rather surprised when the king plopped down on the stairs, arranging his parchment a top the book and unscrewing the ink well hurriedly. Tenderly, he tapped his feather in to the ink, lowering the tip to the parchment paper. His brow was furrowed in great concentration.

Doctor Tot,

Please come to Alexandria when you receive this letter. I need your help. We always talked about how the day would come, but I'm finding it harder to navigate than I thought. Please, come at once.

Zidane

The king straightened his shoulders, looking over his rather chicken scratch handwriting. It certainly was not as long as he expected it to be. But he felt like maybe he didn't have to explain himself anymore. Doctor Tot would understand.

The sound of tin drew Zidane away from his thoughts. He cocked his head up, watching as Steiner emerged from the dining hall ratherly stiffly. The Captain seemed to be in a deep thought as he came across the foyer. His dark eyes darted to find Zidane perched on the stairs and immediately, he saluted. Zidane nearly rolled his eyes.

“Cut that out,” Zidane said, setting his feather down. “How many times do I gotta tell you, you *don’t* need to salute me, Steiner. I’m starting to think you’re mocking me.”

“It’s simply habit,” Steiner replied, relaxing.

“Are you alright?” Zidane asked, arching his eyebrows. “Did Alex do something?”

“No, no,” Steiner shook his head. “Beatrix is having her eat some porridge right now, all is fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Steiner heaved a sigh, tilting his head to the side. He adjusted his helmet. “Never mind that. What are you doing?”

Zidane pursed his lips and folded his parchment paper into thirds. He discarded his supplies on the stairs and came down, weaving around Alex’s make-

believe warfield. He held the letter out towards Steiner, who cautiously took it into his hands.

“I need you to get this letter sent to Doctor Tot today.”

“Doctor Tot?” Steiner echoed, looking at the letter. Curiosity ate him up inside, but he didn’t make a move to open it. “Whatever for? More books? New lesson plans?”

“I want Doctor Tot in this castle as our guest as soon as possible,” Zidane told him.

“Is this about what happened last night?”

Zidane sighed and sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, rustling his dirty blond hair. “We always knew the day would come, Steiner. I wish Dagger was here. She’d know what to do. But she’s not and we have no idea what we’re doing. Doctor Tot is the next best option. He taught Dagger everything she needed to know.” Steiner silently gripped the letter in his hand, his face etched in a frown. Zidane watched the captain for a few moments before he heaved another sigh, rocking between his boots. “That’s what you were thinking about, wasn’t it?”

Steiner was slow to tilt his head back to Zidane. “I keep thinking about watching that balcony rise,

Zidane... It made me realize how much of the past I've simply... hidden away. So many memories and exchanges all those years ago I've never confronted. And seeing it again, I suppose I suffered *deja vu* and just remembered so many things I didn't realize that bothered me," Steiner stopped talking abruptly. It was quiet in the foyer. Just outside the windows, the birds tweeted. "I'm sorry. It's unfair to burden you with these words. I just have had an unsettling feeling within me since that happened last night."

Zidane nodded. "I have a bad feeling, too, Steiner."

6. Links

Chapter Six

Bella wished she could be invisible. After her father left her in the library, she no longer found herself interested in the books around her. The history of Madain Sari laid unopened in her lap. Anxiously, Bella's fingers ran over the raised letters of the title, her dark eyes cast down. She had never been so hopelessly conflicted; waxing and waning between excitement and utter disappointment. For the last ten years, Bella always so desperately wished to have her mother back. Despite their time being so brief together, Bella felt so connected to her mother. When she recalled the moment when Eiko revealed her true link, Bella remembered feeling so relieved. Her mother may have left her, but she had left something for her. But she saw her father's look. He seemed scared. And in a way, that scared her, too. Bella sighed in frustration, tilting her back against the shelf. She simply wished someone would tell her everything. Make it clear to her. Fully explain it. *Why* was it so dangerous?

Bella sighed and pushed the book off her lap, coming to her feet. Her dark orange dress waved back and forth as she left her mess behind, walking through the quiet library and being sure not to make a sound. The scholars, however, bowed politely at her as she passed. Bella wished she wasn't a princess sometimes. She wished she could be someone else entirely. One that wasn't protected from the world without explanation. How was that fair?

"Princess Arabella," Came an airy voice and she almost sighed in frustration. The young girl turned her head promptly, her inky black hair swishing back and forth. The scholar who had greeted her grinned politely from his desk, where a candelabra flickered with its last dying breaths. 'Come here, please, Princess.' He beckoned, the long velvet sleeves waving back and forth. "I have something that I'd like to give you."

Curiously, the young princess wandered towards him. The scholar's desk was quite cluttered. He had written long extravagant notes with the most pristine cursive Bella had ever seen. Several books lay propped open. The scholar had a gentle smile, very paternal. He folded his wrinkled hands together as he watched Bella look over his desk with keen eyes.

“It seems like a lifetime ago, one where I much younger and spry and with hair that had actual color,” He laughed lightly. ‘But I used to help Doctor Tot tutor your mother. That was when Doctor Tot had taken residency here in the castle strictly on the basis of educating Princess Garnet.’ He paused for a moment, licking his lips. “You remind me of your mother of all the princess’ to roam the castle today. And you reflect her in many ways more than just one, young Arabella.”

“Was my mother smart?” Bella’s face lit up.
“Was she studious?”

The scholar laughed. “Once her education began, she never tired of it. It was more of a task having the princess take a break from her lessons than to sit her down and teach her. Garnet was a marvelous and model student.” The scholar reached beneath his desk for a moment and paused. “It was rude of me to eavesdrop on Your Majesty and Your Highness. I have studied in this library for generations and my ears are acutely aware of all whisperings between the shelves. I heard Doctor Tot shall be returning for the best of your education, Arabella. And I thought this may be of use during your studies.”

He held a book out towards her. It was a leather bound book that had been dyed a bright poppy red. It was worn and very old. Carefully, Bella reached out and took it into her hands, looking at the scholar expectantly. He was still smiling warmly, observing as Bella now clutched the book in her hands.

“That book belonged to your mother,” The scholar told her. “It contains all her notes and even some fun doodles. Everything that was taught to her, she wrote about it in that journal. I believe it may aid you in your conquest for understanding and education, Your Highness.”

Bella’s heart thudded loudly in her chest at the idea. Her hands nearly began to tremble. Cautiously, she peeled the cover back. On the front page was a delicate handwriting that wasn’t quite refined yet. It was dated 1793. *The Chronicles of Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII’s Education*. Bella hurriedly began flipping through the worn and frayed pages. There were diagrams, neatly drawn maps, arrows, and notes shoehorned into all corners. And as the pages went on, the handwriting got better and better, the notes much more tedious and her thought processes much more fluid. Bella was rather speechless in the moment and she looked at the scholar.

“Thank you,” It came out more as a breath. Bella shook her head, holding the book tightly as if it could disappear in a cloud of smoke. ‘I will read this at once.’ Bella took a few steps but paused again, turning back to the cheerful and patient scholar. “Thank you for preserving this.”

Lesson #14 Kingdom Heirlooms

Nearly ten years ago, a devastating hurricane formed in the ocean and swirled into the Outer Continent. Doctor Tot said the entire world was shrouded in dark clouds that looked menacing. But only the coast of the Outer Continent faced the brunt of a catastrophic natural force. It is reported as such; a natural disaster that nobody could predict. But Doctor Tot, familiar with the worlds tricks, theorizes it was much more than something natural to scar Gaia’s surface.

Not long before this, the Summoner tribe spoke outwards to the world, contacting people outside of their own circles, despite being reclusive for all the generations before. The Summoners feared for their precious summons, insisting something was gravely

wrong. Their prayer wall, usually quiet and peaceful, allowing for meditation and greater connections, had been bombarded with eerie messages and echoes from the parallel in which they shared. Doctor Tot explained the phenomenon as “interferences”. The Summoners were gravely worried and presented forth a fragmented jewel to be split between the Nations of the Mist Continent. They were given with the hope of preservation and the safety and fate of Gaia. These became known as the Falcon Claws. Doctor Tot turned mine into a very pretty necklace to wear around my neck to treasure the sanctity and trust the Summoners placed in us before their untimely demise.

Bella blinked rapidly, looking up from her dark room. Only one candle flickered on her nightstand. She was sunken into her bed, tangled between the quilts and mountains of pillows. *A pretty necklace...* Bella tilted her head back and closed her eyes, recalling the few brief snippets of her mother she had locked inside of her mind. She could see her mother in the garden. She was holding a young Sarah, balancing her on her hip. It was a clear and beautiful spring day and the fresh breeze raced through her mother’s silky hair as she grinned brightly. And around her neck, gripped in Sarah’s

pudgey hands, Bella could recall a large jewel, with several facets that glowed like a rainbow in the sun's rays. That had to be it. She pressed herself into the pillows, her mother's notes left open in her lap. That necklace had a link to what Bella was trying to uncover. Bella considered that even just holding it, observing it, could provide some clairty to her. A rap on her door startled the princess, however, and she sat forward as the door creaked open.

It was Beatrix. She glanced around the room before finding the young girl laid up in her bed. "Do you feel alright?" Beatrix came completely into the room now, the hallway light shedding in behind her. "You're not feeling feverish, are you?" Hurriedly, she came forward. Bella snapped her book shut and furiously shook her head.

"No, no, I'm fine, Beatrix, really," Bella told her, pulling herself off the bed to stand before the tall general. "I was just reading, that's all."

"If you're certain," Beatrix reached forward, however, feeling Bella's cheek and forehead. "Dinner is ready."

"Must I go?" Bella sighed. "I'd like to keep reading."

“Your father wants all of you there,” Beatrix replied, crossing towards the closet and pulling down a light woolen cardigan for Bella. ‘Come on, now. Put this on and let’s go.’ Bella sighed and shuffled her feet back and forth. Beatrix grinned, almost sympathetically. “Please, Bella. A nice hearty meal and a little pudding. Then you can come back and read for the rest of the evening.” Bella finally complied, holding her arms out to allow Beatrix to drape the garment over her. Beatrix rubbed Bella’s arms soothingly. “You’re just like your mother. You’d much rather read than feed yourself.”

Bella grinned at the thought, picking some lint from her sleeve.

Zidane always detested how every single room in the Alexandrian Castle had to be so grandiose. Even rooms the “commoners” would never lay eyes on. Zidane always chose the smallest dining hall to have dinner in. It was the only real meal served in the castle that was more an event, as it consumed over an hour of everyone’s evening. Zidane felt dinners were important to his family. As a young boy growing up in Tantalus, supper time spent in the dramatic evening sunsets were always a festival.

Especially when Dagger passed away, Zidane clung to dinners in the evening to have a real sit down with his daughters. It was one of the few moments of the day his wildly different daughters weren't moving around hurriedly, acting like the most busy princesses in the world.

That night, as the moons began to overtake the sky, the help of Alexandria were quick on their feet to serving the large silver platters covered in decadent meals. Even after seventeen years as king, all the catering still made him quite uncomfortable. Though he'd never admit it, either, he had never gotten used to the type of food he was forced to eat as king. Sitting before him was roasted pig with skin so tender, it was orange. Several different platters of cheese from all corners of the world. Boiled duck with a bed of greens surrounding it. Turkey legs seared in garlic butter and marbled bread slathered in sesame oil. It was all so rich for Zidane's tastebuds, who'd happily resort back to shredded pork sandwiches and poached eggs at a moments notice.

Zidane started with the marble bread. Hurriedly, a maid rushed to set a rammican beside his plate of intricate butter slices, carved with a fine hand to resemble a lily of the valley. To be polite, Zidane

smeared it across his bread despite the fact it belonged in a travelling art show. He glanced between his daughters, each one helping themselves to the variety of food they had always been used to. Just like their mother, Zidane thought, being careful to not let his silverware echo across the high ceilings. Just outside the window, the crickets and cicadas composed their night time symphony. The sky was littered in stars that twinkled between bands of misty blues and galaxy purples.

“What’re you smilin’ about?” Came Alex’s cheeky voice, her dialect heavy from her father. She was grinning with her dark eyes across the table at Sarah, whose face had grown rosy. The eldest Tribal sister was sitting up straight, her fork stopped in mid-air with a cluster of greens stacked on it.

“Nothing,” Sarah shook her head. “Am I not allowed to smile?”

“Since when do we get excited when Chef Quina whips up that nasty liver pudding?” Alex pointed towards the one unappealing bowl in the center of the table that was so congealed, it simply bobbed with the motions of the table.

“Chef Quina says it’s good for your bones,” Zidane grinned.

“Bleh,” Alex wrinkled her nose. “So, if you’re not smilin’ about the liver, then what *are* you smiling about?”

“Again, nothing,” Sarah gave her little sister a pointed look. Alex’s smile only got wider. “What?”

Alex looked between Bella and Zidane. “Sarah’s in love!” She defiantly claimed.

Immediately, Sarah’s cutlery hit her porcelain dish, her cheeks burning red. “Alex! I am not! Why would you make a claim such as that?!”

“Because I’m right!” Alex’s tail wiggled behind her with excitement and naughtiness. “It’s the boy with the pointy ears, isn’t it?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sarah shook her head, her blond hair beating against her round cheeks that were as red as tomatoes. “You don’t know anything about love, Alex.”

“Well, *I* know that every princesses sixteenth birthday is magical,” Alex said, holding her hands out at her side. “What, you haven’t read Lord Avon?”

“You know I have,” Sarah cast a weary look at her sister. “Mother used to read them to me.”

“I’m sure Mommy used to read them to me, too,” Alex said. She then looked to her father. “Right?”

Zidane looked up from his plate and casually shrugged. “She probably whispered some sweet lines to you between all your naps and feedings.”

“Well, I remember Mother reading them to me,” Sarah said.

“Bella,” Zidane cast a look down the table at his middle child, who had a few meager cubes of cheese and a slice of marbled bread. She had been rather quiet, her eyes trained towards the window, watching as distantly a few meteors burned through the atmosphere. She hadn’t eaten much. He was sure she had a lot on her mind and plenty of feelings to process. She perked up at her name, cocking her head at her father. “You’re not eating much and speaking less than usual. Is everything alright?”

Bella pursed her lips for a moment, twirling a cheese cube between her slender fingers. “Daddy, I have a question.”

“Alright,” Zidane nodded. “Shoot.”

“Where is Mother’s Falcon Claw?”

There was a silence at the table for a few beats. Zidane reached for his chalice of water, arching his eyebrows towards Bella. She held her gaze steady with him, watching as Zidane tilted his head back and took a sip of water. “Why?”

That frustration that had boiled beneath Bella’s skin earlier than morning resurfaced and she had to bite her tongue for a moment to stop any words that may have come across as not thought out. But again, she could hear that aggravating undertone in her father’s voice. One of side stepping that quite hurt her.

“It’s an Alexandrian Heirloom. Will we ever see it again?”

Zidane wondered how deep into the books and notes and journals Bella had gotten in the library. There was so much information filling those shelves, some written in current times, reflecting on the past they felt was deciphered incorrectly. He found himself, again, stuck in his internal tug of war. Bella wanted answers. And he felt it was wrong to hide that from her. But the desire to shield her from the world, to protect her from everything that haunted her mother, was so strong.

“It’s safe,” Zidane told her, ripping his bread apart. “And you three will see it again one day, when the time is right.”

“When would that be?” Bella asked.

“When Sarah takes the throne.”

“But where is it?” Bella prodded.

Zidane paused and looked over his daughter, who had had a new fire lit inside her. “Don’t worry, Bella. Like I said, it’s safe.”

Even at the dead of night, Alexandria never found a true moment of silence. In the past decade, the small kingdom had grown far beyond its original outskirts. It would never tower as high or elaborately as Lindblum, but Alexandria had grown far from being a small quiet, humbled kingdom. Now it was a bustling city that attracted artisans and merchants with a refreshed view of the world.

Zidane found himself laid out across a plush chaise lounger, an arm dangling carelessly across his stomach, the other tucked beneath his head. He had his head tilted backwards, simply watching and counting the stars. A cigarette protruded from his

lips, a hazy ribbon of smoke drifting into the still sky. Beneath the king's skin, turmoil rumbled about. He transitioned between being sure in his actions to questioning himself as a ruler and a father all over again. He sighed in frustration, tapping the ash off his cigarette to the side.

He sat up, folding his legs towards him. Zidane glanced around the empty balcony before shaking his head. "Dagger, what do I do?" He looked up at the sparkling sky that unfurled before him, swirling far away, to the beginning of time. 'How can I be sure I'm doin' the right thing? I bet you're up there thinkin' about what a jackass I am.' Zidane huffed and drooped his shoulders for a moment. "Well, give me a sign! Tell me what I'm supposed to do! I never had a doubt in my mind I could protect you, but how can I know I'll be able to protect the girls?" Zidane stood up, raking his hands through his hair. Carelessly, he threw his cigarette over the edge of the railing. "They need you, Dagger. *I need you.*"

Zidane gripped the railing of the balcony. The stone beneath his sticky palms was so cool, seeping through his skin. He had his lips pursed, his cerulean blue eyes searching the sky as if he was expecting Dagger to come gracing him between the constellations. He willed her to appear in silky

flowing robes that wrapped elaborately around her slender body. He wanted her to appear before him and skim his cheek with her velvet skin. Zidane's tail was tense behind him and unmoving.

"I know you're out there somewhere," Zidane told the sky gently. "And if you can hear me, Dagger... Please, just come home."

7. The Sanctity of Peace

Chapter Seven

The mid-afternoon of Alexandria was greeted with a thick overcast that threatened rain at any moment. The maids whispered furiously at each other for not drawing the curtains before they mopped the front foyer. They cursed the clumsy Knights of Pluto beneath their breath. Zidane found himself in the spacious sitting and tea room that connected all three of the girl's bedrooms together. It had several tall wall-length windows that faced the front of the property of the castle, overlooking the wide canals that divided the gates from the upper portion of the town. Distantly, thunder was beginning to rumble. He sat criss cross on the floor, facing Alex. Between them, several cards were strewn about, some discarded off to the side. Alex sat criss cross, as well, completely disregarding her lessons in etiquette. She was wearing a buttercup yellow dress with fluffy tulle that reached up her neck. In her small hands, she observed the cards she had, scrutinizing them closely.

“It’s your turn, Alex,” Zidane said, lowering his cards to his lap. “Do you need help?”

“No!” Alex’s brown eyes darted up furiously at the suggestion. “If you see my other cards, you’re just gonna use that information to beat me!”

“I’m just trying to help you,” Zidane grinned patiently. “Tetra Master is a tough game. I can’t say I understood it when I was nine.”

“I want to be the best princess player on the whole of Gaia.”

“Well, I think you’re already that,” Zidane laughed, pointing to the marble slate with several cards placed in various spots. “Look how many of my cards you’ve claimed.”

“You’re going easy on me,” Alex shook her head, returning her attention back to her cards. After a moment, she withdrew one of a Mu, setting it beside a Malboro card that belonged to Zidane. ‘Hah! That card wins.’ Zidane smiled and reached forward, turning the card sideways. “Daddy, can I compete in the Treno Tournament this fall?”

“You gonna pay your entry fee?” Zidane flicked his eyes up from his deck of cards for a brief

moment. He then selected his card, placing it beside one of Alex's and claiming it.

"I'll just have Beatrix do it," Alex said.

Zidane was about to laugh when several large brassy bells began sounding outside. Alex perked up at the sound, climbing to her feet before her father had a chance to react. Her full skirt crinkled as she climbed atop a plush ottoman and pressed her hands to the clean glass, bringing her face close to get a good look. Zidane appeared behind her, tilting his head over her's.

"Those are the airship bells," Zidane said.

"Whose comin' to visit?" The young girl nearly bent over backwards to look at her dad. "Is it Uncle Blank?"

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you," Zidane chuckled, combing his hands through her wavy blonde hair. "Your Uncle Blank doesn't get an announced entrance like this."

"Uncle Cid?" Alex continued, now turning on the ottoman to face Zidane. "If it's Uncle Cid does that mean Auntie Eiko is with him?"

“Let’s go greet our guest,” Zidane held his arm to her and like the ball of energy she was, she leapt from the furniture like it was so daring and latched onto her father’s elbow.

The west wing of the Alexandrian Castle hosted the airdock that had been renovated kindly by Regent Cid who had complained of its dredged state when he would visit. It was up to the Regent’s spec, but still fell lackluster in comparison to the esteemed Lindblum Castle. Sarah and Bella had met up with Zidane and Alex, coaxed out from their cozy rainy day activities by the chimes of bells. When the royal family appeared in the tall archway of the airdock, Zidane was surprised to see a Lindblum fleet ship in the dock.

“Daddy, was there some conference happening?” Sarah asked beside him, watching the Knights of Pluto haul luggage onto the pier. “What’s Uncle Cid doing here?”

Zidane began forward to do some investigating, but luckily did not have to go far. The passengers of the airship appeared from the cabin. To Zidane’s relief, it was Doctor Tot. The owl had aged quite a

bit, but had done so with a look of esteem and a wise edge to the gray ruffles in his fathers. Zidane had remained quite close with Doctor Tot, especially in the years following Dagger's death. Her untimely demise had drawn the two together in a tight comraderie. Zidane oftened called on Doctor Tot for all things that required finnese and creative thought.

“Zidane, Your Majesty, it is great as usual to be in your company,” Doctor Tot greeted warmly, his monocle glowing beneath the large torch chandeliers that dangled above. “You’re looking quite well for being a father and a king, if I do say so.”

“Hey, Doctor,” The two men embraced like the lifelong friends they had always been. “It’s an honor. Thank you for coming so quickly. Gotta say, I’m surprised to see you in a Lindblum ship.” Zidane tilted his head back to admire the glistening ship. Despite cruising through the air for a long journey, it looked as pristine as the day it had been assembled. Even for it being a simple fleet ship, Regent Cid never skimped on attractive aerodynamic designs.

“Ah, Regent Cid was so kind to lend it to me, equipped with a knowledgeable team,” Doctor Tot removed his monocle and shined it on his tweed vest. “I came from Lindblum, however.”

“Really?” Zidane asked.

“Yes, yes,” Doctor Tot nodded. “I was visiting with Princess Eiko, you see, and the post master of Treno flew all the way to Lindblum to hand deliver your note to me. We left as soon as we received it.”

“We?” Zidane echoed.

On cue, the cabin door of the airship opened and the crew that was on deck arranging equipment immediately saluted. Crisp and still as statues the crew remained as Princess Eiko of Lindblum appeared on the deck of the airship. She had allowed her long purple hair free down her back, the frames of her bangs held backwards in a braid against her neck. She was wearing a blue dress with a heavy jewel dangling from her neck. And in her hand was a leather satchel full of journals and books.

“Ah, yes, Princess Eiko accompanied me,” Doctor Tot explained as Zidane’s eyes simply hovered on the young princess. “Your letter was quite timely. Her Highness and I were discussing things of a similar nature when your post arrived.”

Zidane could only watch Eiko. She took her time stretching from the long journey, being sure to relieve the crew from their erect positions. She

fluffed her hair and took a moment to bring a mirror from her bag and check her complexion, which was rather flushed from being beneath the sun. The last words they had exchanged with each other hadn't been pleasant. And Zidane would have been lying if he said he didn't feel bad about how they had left things. She had thrusted him into a rather awkward position. She had jumped the gun. But Zidane knew her intentions had been pure.

Eiko straightened her shoulders and descended the platform to stand beside Doctor Tot. She smiled, though Zidane knew it was one of professionalism. He expected she was still angry with him. She had never outgrown her incubator of grudges. Many days, Zidane could still see that six year old girl beneath all her silky dresses and etiquette classes. Lindblum may have made her a princess, but there was no washing out the fiery little independent girl she had once been.

"I hope it's okay I came," Eiko said.

"Yes, I should have sent a post, I can be so forgetful," Doctor Tot shook his head, unaware of Eiko's borderline mocking tone. "But I believe Princess Eiko will aid me greatly in the educative task I am about to take on. After all, it's been over

twenty years since I last tutored Her Majesty, may she rest in peace.”

“Perfectly fine,” Zidane held his arms out at his side. ‘The Castle is more than prepared to host you both.’ He held a steady eye contact with Eiko. “Why don’t you two get showed to your rooms and unpack. Take it easy today. I’ll head to the kitchen and let Quina know the guest number has changed.”

“Zidane, I’d like to chat with you in a little bit,” Eiko said just before he stepped away. “Before dinner, preferably.”

“Alright, fine,” Zidane nodded, holding his tongue. “Girls, come say hello.”

After the commotions of the guests had died away, the Alexandrian princesses returned to their sitting chambers. A somber rain was now coming from the sky, drenching the window panes, much like the day of their mother’s funeral. Alex scoured over the playing field of cards she and her father had left behind and hooted with delight to discover she had won. Bella and Sarah sunk down into the brocade couches, hugging throw pillows to their chests.

Sarah had stars in her eyes. “Wow, Doctor Tot has come to tutor us! With Aunt Eiko, too. What a treat. We’re finally getting that rich education Mother had always raved about.”

Bella tilted her head towards the windows. “Daddy told me he was coming.”

“Really?” Sarah leaned forward. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“They’re here for me.”

Alex stood up with several cards in her hands, turning to her sister’s. “Does anyone want to play Tetra Master?”

“Not right now, Alex,” Sarah shook her head. “Bella, what’s going on?”

Bella heaved a sigh, falling into the mountain of pillows that lay behind her. Lazily, she blew an inky lock from the frame of her face and shrugged. “I’m so special, apparently.”

“You two never want to play Tetra Master,” Alex now came to stand at the coffee table, pressing her deck of cards to it. “I’m trying to get good!”

“Alex,” Sarah gave her youngest sister an exasperated look. “Bella and I are trying to have a

serious conversation.”

“Yeah, yeah, Bella is special,” Alex shook her head, rousing her hair furiously. “Aren’t we all special? We’re the princesses, for pete’s sake!”

“This is different,” Bella said, her voice low.

“How is it different?” Alex asked, lowering her cards now. “Why do you always get to be the special one?”

“Alex—”

“You think I want things to be like this?!” Bella shot to her feet, clutching a pillow tightly beneath her fingers like murderous claws on a bird. Alex and Sarah only watched their sister as her face flushed. “Neither of you two have to live with the look Daddy gives me.”

“What look?” Sarah furrowed her brow and shook her head. “Bella, what’s going on?”

“I’m dangerous!” Bella exploded, hurling the throw pillow back onto the couch. “I’m dangerous and Daddy is scared of me.”

Sarah stood now, her red satin dress falling down her slender legs. “I doubt Daddy’s scared of you. He isn’t scared of anything, Bella.”

“You didn’t see the look on his face,” Bella was so close to tears now and she shuffled away from her sister’s, fleetingly watching the storm rage on outside. “You don’t understand anything at all. Neither of you do.” Tensely, Bella exited, quietly closing her chamber door behind her. Thunder grumbled lowly between the silent Alex and Sarah, who stared after her door before looking rather miserably towards each other. After a beat, Sarah began across the room briskly.

“Where are you going?” Alex asked, looking over her shoulder.

“To find Beatrix or Steiner,” Sarah paused at the door. “Since when has Daddy been one to keep secrets?” And with that, she left, leaving the youngest princess to stare vacantly at the vibrant Tetra Master cards in her hands, her tail waving faithfully behind her.

Down below in the sprawling Alexandrian garden, the thriving leaves were dewey as the rain droplets slid over them, plunking onto the neatly laid cobblestone that glistened beneath the dreary day. Zidane walked beside Eiko, holding a black

umbrella over their heads. Eiko's shoulders were straight, her chin tilted up. Zidane was amazed how much the castle-life had refined her. Some days, he considered Eiko was even more graceful than Dagger was. She held a woolen shawl over her shoulders, the heel of her boot echoing across the stone. Zidane furrowed his free hand in the pocket of his black trousers.

"So, Your Highness, what was the reason for your summon of me?" Zidane asked, casting a teasing look towards her. Eiko remained stoic, however, and Zidane huffed. "You're much too serious nowadays, don't you think? Your work way too hard for a princess, Eiko."

"I'll be a Regent myself one day," Eiko told him, flashing her bright blue eyes at him. "Lindblum is much more complex than Alexandria. No offense, of course."

"None taken," Zidane shrugged, watching the path curl around a corner. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere near that throne. Hell, I don't even want this one."

Eiko stopped walking. Zidane halted, being sure to shield her from the steady downpour all around them. It was quiet outside beside the croaking frogs.

“You don’t want to be king? Zidane, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to this kingdom.”

“How’s that?” Zidane shook his head. “Dagger did most of the work.”

“You’ve never changed, Zidane,” Eiko said, her voice even and lacking beat. “You’re still the modest goofball you’ve always been. Not the throne could change you. If you weren’t king right now, what would you honestly be doing with your life?”

“I dunno,” Zidane shrugged, casting a look around the empty garden. A fog was beginning to slink in from the river. “Livin’ a quiet life somewhere with my girls. Letting them roam the country side. Have a garden with them. Be somewhere a little less stuffy, y’know? With Dagger gone, I feel there’s nothing more I can do for these people. But my first born is promised to them. I don’t think I really get a say, king or not.”

Eiko’s face softened for a moment. “Like I said. You’ve never changed. You only think about her.”

Zidane shuffled his boots, kicking a slick rock from the path. Silently, the two began another slow walk, slicing through the somber downpour. The fog danced at their ankles, the mist of the rain spraying

across their skin. “What’s the real reason for all of this, Eiko? Seems unlikely you’d come all the way from Lindblum to talk about my problems.”

Eiko grinned lightly. “Yes, I wanted to speak to you before dinner about something important.” Eiko paused again, glancing towards the blossoming roses with velvet petals coated in droplets of water. “It’s about Arabella, as you’ve probably guessed.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Zidane nodded.

“I want you to be well aware now of what your letter has set in motion,” Eiko told him. “Doctor Tot has entrusted me under his guideful eye to take the lead on Arabella’s education. It’s been so long for the old soul—I would be much more suitable as Arabella’s tutor and mentor. I want us to be clear, though, Zidane: I don’t want you meddling. This must be done with finesse. Eidolons carry great weight and it’s important she understands fully and thoroughly. With her knowledge, Arabella could be an Ambassador of Peace for all of Gaia one day.”

“I don’t want you grooming her,” Zidane gripped the umbrella tightly in his hands as he became acutely aware of the rain pattering against it. “She just needs the basics, the generals, the history.”

“Arabella needs much more than that,” Eiko said defiantly, arranging her shawl over her shoulders delicately. “That is why I’m asking now, Zidane. No meddling. We’re doing this my way.”

Zidane looked out towards the river. The ripples of the rain nearly reflected what he felt on the inside. “I don’t think I have much of a choice, do I?”

“This is all for the best, Zidane,” Eiko reached forward, looping her elbow through his. Together, they walked through the large plaza and down towards the embankment of the river. The gondolas drifted leisurely. Guards stood still in the rain perched beside the tall iron wrought gates of the castle. Zidane stared vacantly across the water, remembering the many times he had stood in that exact spot, waiting to greet Dagger as she drifted across the shallow river. “Arabella is the key to being sure what happened never does again.”

“You and Dagger see to that,” Zidane said, his eyes never tearing away from the turbulent surface of the water.

“Arabella is the future of the Summoners,” Eiko replied steadily. She seemed so sure in herself, her self-proclamations never wavering. “She is the first generation to not reap the sufferage our people have

for generations. She'll be a breath of fresh air. The epitome of peace. More so than her mother ever could be.”

“I just hope you know what you’re doing,” Zidane held in an exasperated sigh. “And when you teach her I hope you remember she is just an innocent girl.”

“She is. And her education will not spoil that.”

Zidane nodded slowly. “I think it’s what Dagger would have wanted, Eiko.”

“I think so, too.”

Sarah had wandered many of the halls of the castle, searching for anybody whose lips concealed valuable information. She inquired guards as to Beatrix’s whereabouts. But finally, as she stumbled past the armory, she came across Steiner who was inspecting swords for nicks.

“Steiner, oh thank goodness I found you,” Sarah let out a breath of relief, stepping into the rather chilly armory. The narrow windows displayed the storm outside, several candles placed on tables to

shed light across the weapons. Steiner immediately paused from his task and lowered the sword.

“Princess Sarah, what’s wrong?” He was coming to his feet but Sarah gestured for him to pause and be quiet. Sarah closed the door behind her and pressed her back to it for a moment, watching Steiner cautiously. “Has something happened, Your Highness?”

“Steiner, what’s going on around here?”

“What do you mean?” The Captain only blinked at her.

Sarah drifted further into the room, her dress waving back and forth. Steiner watched her with arched eyebrows. He could see in her blue eyes she was curious and on the verge of demanding. She reflected so much of her father when he had a hunch. Sarah came to the table, looking between the swords that divided them.

“Why is Doctor Tot and Aunt Eiko here?” Sarah asked, pressing her hands to the edge of the table. ‘Why is Bella acting so strange and upset?’ There was silence and Sarah barely waited a beat. “And why does it seem like Daddy suddenly has secrets?”

“Princess, I assure you nobody is hiding anything from you,” Steiner took on his diligent tone. It was enough to make Sarah want to roll her eyes. “And everything will be made clear to you soon. Just give your father time.”

“So something really *is* going on.”

“Well— no,” Steiner stammered. “N-not exactly...”

“Steiner, if you don’t tell me, I will have someone else just do me the courtesy,” Sarah crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t appreciate not being told things about my sister’s when it’s obviously of a concerning matter.”

As Steiner looked across the table at the slender, fiery, and calculating princess, he couldn’t help but be rushed with a feeling of *deja vu*. That royal tone Sarah assumed, it was so much like her mother. Though Sarah was the spitting image of her father, it was so evident the affect Dagger had on her daughter in the six years they shared together. Steiner recalled the many times Dagger would let out ‘hmphs!’ and dig her fists into her hips.

“Please, Princess. Trust in time,” Steiner still took his shot.

“Something strange has happened, Steiner. I feel it. I’m uneasy.”

“With time, Princess... With time...”

8. True Identities

Chapter Eight

The next morning in the dining hall, the table was only occupied by Alex, Zidane, and Sarah. Alex happily nibbled on a poached egg, drinking herself silly on juice. The rain had receded but the dark skies still plagued Alexandria. The dining hall was quiet. The maids had disappeared to clean the guest chambers. Sarah's eyes continually darted up from her toast and milk. She pursed her lips, turning the stiff slice of bread in her hand. She then glanced towards the vacant seat beside her and cleared her throat, drawing her father's attention away from his own breakfast.

"Where's Bella?" Sarah asked, arching her eyebrows. "I haven't seen her all morning."

"Yeah, she wasn't in the bathing chambers," Alex agreed now, setting her poached egg down. "I actually had a bucket of warm water for myself!"

"She's with Eiko," Zidane replied, his eyes cast down as he busied himself with cutting his boiled egg in half. "We'll see her at lunch."

Sarah hunched her shoulders for a moment, biting her lip. She watched as Zidane ate his breakfast slowly, casting a look between both his daughters. “What is she doing with Aunt Eiko?” Sarah prodded. Zidane paused again. ‘She must have woken up early for me and Alex to not see her at all.’ Zidane was quiet and Sarah found herself antsy again like she had been the evening before with Steiner in the armory. Her heart rate accelerated in that moment. “Daddy, do you feel like you can tell us everything?”

“I never like to keep things from you,” Zidane said.

“It feels like you are right now.”

Zidane had always prided in his girl’s being so attentive and in tune with their surroundings. It made him feel as if he was passing on a trustful sense, equipping them with the basic street knowledge he felt they needed. But it came at a price, sometimes. Sarah and Bella were especially quisitive by nature and he could see his daughter was taking no substitutes in the moment. Zidane sighed, pressing his back to his chair.

“Finish your breakfast. We’ll go find Doctor Tot.”

The corridor leading towards the library was chilly. Sarah hugged herself and brushed her skin fiercely against the goosebumps that had puckered up. Alex held onto her father's hand as the three walked side by side down the rather narrow corridor that ran parallel to the underground library. Sarah rarely went down to the library. She enjoyed books, mostly of fictional writing, but never enough to go down and hang out with the scholars. Old charcoal drawings portraying Alexandria at different intervals over time plastered the walls. There were few candles to accompany the already cold hallway. Soon enough, however, the hallway spilled into a modestly sized sitting room that was arranged with old oak desks, comfy loungers, and short bookcases with leisure reading. Two doors were facing each other from the side walls. The royal family laid their eyes on Doctor Tot who had tall stacks of books and mountains of scrolls toppling across the desk he had claimed during his residency. The old owl was deep in thought, completely oblivious to the world around him, as usual.

“Doctor Tot?” Sarah stepped forward, her arms still crossed over her chest. The scholar looked up,

obviously startled by his thoughts, but that melted away to reveal his gentle side.

“Oh, Princess Sarah, Princess Alexandra— what a wonderful surprise for your father to bring you down here,” Doctor Tot removed himself from behind the desk, cocking his head up at the oldest and tallest princess. “What is the pleasure?”

“Where is Bella?” Sarah asked. She tried to conceal the anxiety that riddled her voice. Sarah glanced towards her father. She had never seen him at such a loss of words. He hadn’t even acted this quiet and spacious when her mother had passed away. “I haven’t seen her all morning. Is... Is she down here?”

“You’re a wonderful sister,” Doctor Tot commended in his pleasant and patient nature. “I’m sure it’s quite confusing as to why me and Princess Eiko would make an appearance, coupled by your sister’s sudden absence. I can assure you all is well, Princess Sarah. She is just beyond that door.”

Sarah’s chilling blue eyes flashed over the mahogany door for a fleeting moment. “What are they doing?”

“Oh, it’s nothing malicious,” Doctor Tot assured her with a chuckle. He reached for his monocle, wiping it of the old dust that covered the Alexandrian library. The dust bunnies brought back the fondest memories. “Princess Arabella is in no trouble at all. She is simply being tutored.”

“But, why so suddenly?” Sarah shook her head. Her wavy blonde hair tumbled over her shoulder. ‘What is so pressing for her to know? And... why aren’t Alex and I being tutored, as well?’ Slowly, Doctor Tot’s eyes wandered to Zidane and the eldest sister felt her temper spike. Sarah was always a gracious and calm young woman, but she absolutely detested being treated like a child. Especially when it was anything concerning her little sister’s. “I am asking you, Doctor Tot.”

Zidane sighed in the next moment, gesturing for Alex to sit down beside Doctor Tot’s cluttered desk. Zidane crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the back of a tall chair. “I brought them here because you’re better with your words than I am, Doctor.”

“The princesses are in search of the unabashed truth,” Doctor Tot grinned, looking between Sarah and Alex. “Yes, of course. If they’re anything like

their mother, I would suspect nothing less. Well, I am free to speak with you two. Princess Sarah, please sit down. Your Majesty—”

“I think I should leave,” Zidane straightened up. “Whatever they need to know, just tell them, please.” And with that, Zidane turned on his heels and promptly left. Sarah was stiff as she listened to her father’s footsteps recede down the thick running carpets of the narrow hallway. Slowly, she looked to where he had just left before turning to Doctor Tot who had returned to his desk to rearrange it and grasp his bearings. Sarah’s eyes lingered on her youngest sister. Alex sat in her chair with a face that wasn’t sure what to expect. She was having a hard time grasping the weight of the situation.

“May I ask my first question?” Sarah stepped closer towards the desk, but made no move to sit down. Doctor Tot grinned at her. “Why is my father acting so odd? I’ve never seen him act this way.”

“He’s simply overwhelmed,” Doctor Tot did a short hop into his seat, adjusting his hips back and forth and ruffling his feathers. “I assure you, Princess, it’s well-placed anxiety. Just as your own is. I imagine it’s hard for your father. It probably reminds him much of his days with your mother.”

The slightest mention of Dagger had Sarah's entire body relaxing. Her mother had always been a tranquil thought to her. She remembered fondly the days she had shared in the castle with her mother. Despite always being the most important and busy person in the world, Dagger had always made time to share moments with Sarah. Sarah had spent a lot of her days with Zidane, who carried her around the castle and told her everything. But it was always a moment of light when her mother would appear in her chambers in the evening to cuddle her and read Sarah her most favorite works. Somedays, Sarah had to remind herself she wasn't the only person to lose someone so dear to her.

Slowly, the princess lowered herself into a seat beside Alex, gazing across the desk expectantly at the tutor who she believed had made a long-lasting impression on her mother. "What's going on, Doctor Tot?"

"Ah, the most important question of all," Doctor Tot nodded, shuffling through a few scrolls. Finally, he extended one towards her that was wrapped in worn parchment with a bright red wax seal on it. 'Please take this as a reference.' Sarah cautiously reached across and accepted the scroll. It was so old with shriveled edges that threatened to crumble at

any mal-treatment. “That map belonged to your father in his youth when he traveled the world with your mother and their friends. It’s a map of the entire world. To each corner of Gaia.”

Sarah unwound it carefully, holding it up between her and Alex. Together, their blue eyes soaked in what they saw. They recognized each continent from the studies they were put through as young girls. The map was marked in several handwritings. Some they recognized as their father’s. Sarah knew a few scrawls belonged to her mother. There were arrows inching through the oceans; directing attention to small islands.

“Now, find the Outer Continent on the map.”

“It’s this one,” Alex pointed.

“Very good,” Doctor Tot nodded. “Now, you should see a small arrow on the very western coast.”

“Yes, it’s right here,” Sarah replied, not tearing her eyes away from the map.

“That is where our story starts, Princesses...” Doctor Tot told them. “At a small village called Madain Sari...”

Zidane had to go out into the garden for a smoke. His nerves were shot. It felt like all around him, Dagger's presence was seeping through the walls and coming up through the floor. It was as if she was surrounding him again and he couldn't help but feel like he was failing in every way. Zidane wandered through the windy garden, his boots carelessly splashing through puddles. It was humid outside and the air clung to him like all his regrets and self-loathing did. He reached inside of his vest and lit a cigarette as he brushed past the leaves, uncaring of the droplets of rain that dribbled onto him. Zidane walked briskly past guards without even acknowledging them. But abruptly, his legs stopped and his hazy cigarette dangled from his lips as he came to stand before a granite rock that gleamed in the dreary weather.

Slowly, Zidane came forward before sighing and sliding down on the ground to sit beside it. His fingers grazed the cool surface of the stone and he shook his head, tilting it backwards and exhaling a plume of smoke. Zidane heaved a sigh, listening as distantly the thunder rumbled like his own mind did. All alone, Zidane felt his blood rushing through his veins and his heart pounding. He looked towards the

rock as if he was looking at somebody so dear to him; someone he had known his whole life.

“What am I doing wrong?” Zidane asked out loud. He paused only for a moment before taking another drag of his cigarette. ‘Why does it feel like something terrible is going to happen, Dagger? The world has been at peace for seventeen years and it feels like, at any moment, a meteor is gonna fall from the sky or Alexandria is going to blow up into smithereens. I don’t know why I feel like this. I’d give anything to not be going through this turmoil. Hell, I know it’s affecting Bella. She’s so much like you... tone sensitive... acutely aware of body language... “Zidane took another drag of his cigarette.” I can’t put my finger on it, Dagger,’ Zidane continued, uncaring if anyone heard his discombobulated thoughts. “I don’t remember being nearly this concerned when your true Summoner heritage was revealed. I don’t get it. Why does it scare me so much with Bella? Is it just because of everything we went through?” Zidane glanced towards the tombstone, willing it to offer anything wise. “I can’t let history repeat itself, Dagger. And I can never let the past touch the girls. I would never forgive myself if something happened to them.

They're all I have left of you and I'm not willing to take any chances.”

Zidane was quiet for a beat, the first droplets of the storm coming down from the sky. A cool sensation reached his hair and neck as the rain steadily began to pick up. Zidane didn't bat an eye, however. He shielded his cigarette, glancing upwards at the sky in dismay. “If you had the chance to walk this planet again, Dagger, would you even recognize me after so much time? I’m not the man I was seventeen years ago. I’m a stranger compared to the man you promised yourself to on our wedding day. I may have cheated destiny, but I’m payin’ the price now. Condemned to live without the person I love most, left to run a kingdom that doesn’t even need me, and left in charge of the three most precious girls that I’m not even sure I could protect. Good god, look at me, Dagger. I’m not who I used to be. I have no idea what the hell happened to him after all these years...”

The rain picked up a little in pace and the water dribbled down from Zidane’s hair, cascading down his flushed cheeks and over his quivering lips. Zidane pressed his shoulder against the wet tombstone and listened to the storm come alive around him, pattering against the cobblestone and

rippling across the river. “How am I supposed to know what to do?” Zidane croaked, pressing his temple against the rock. “You left me with no clues, Dagger. Am I supposed to be this worried? Surely I’m overreacting. You’d probably tell me I was, anyhow.”

Zidane flicked his cigarette towards the bushes and let out a huff. He felt so pathetic laid up against Dagger’s grave, letting his trousers and button-up get absolutely soaked. He waxed and waned between thinking he was utterly wrong, but the most correct person in the kingdom. Was Eiko right? Was Zidane only caught up in the past? Zidane furrowed his brow, his eyelashes fluttering as the rain droplets continued to come down across his somber face. Zidane couldn’t shake the undeniable feeling he had deep inside. Even if no one around him sensed the same kind of danger, Zidane wasn’t one to throw those feelings away—not when it ate him up in such a way. Zidane told himself that Kuja nor Garland had any control over him anymore. That was all over and he was living his life in peace. At least, it’s what he wanted to think. The inner turmoil that tossed and turned in his belly was unsettling. Zidane wasn’t sure how long he could truly ignore it for.

“... and you see, Princess Sarah, that night at your party when the dancing was disturbed and the castle made quite a ruckus, that was your sister activating a special portion of the castle. A balcony that responds to those of Summoning pasts,” Doctor Tot explained. Alex had slumped in her seat, combing through the several scrolls Doctor Tot had given them, containing histories of the world. Sarah was pacing, her arms crossed over her chest as she soaked in every word that Doctor Tot told her. “It was a special balcony that had been added to the castle not long after a terrible hurricane swept across Madain Sari and the Falcon Claws were divided between all of the nations for safe keeping.”

“The Falcon Claws...” Sarah echoed, her voice nearly a whisper. She lowered her arms and looked over her shoulder. “That was the necklace Mother used to wear.”

“I’m impressed you remembered,” Doctor Tot nodded, folding his feathers together on his desk. “Yes, the Falcon Claws was given to Alexandria long before your mother ever was part of the equation. The jewel had simply been kept away in shadows. But when I began tutoring your mother and realized the nature of her roots, I had the Falcon Claw sealed within epoxy. It looked much more fit

to dangle from a princess' neck at the time and helped disguise the jewel, as well."

Sarah came towards Doctor Tot's desk and took a book into her hands, running her fingers along the gold floral etchings across the cover. "What would happen, Doctor Tot, if I had the Falcon Claw in my possession or any shards of jewels with summoning powers?"

"Why, nothing at all," Doctor Tot told her, adjusting his monocle. "Summoners are the only ones who can use precious jewels like this. They require the powers to communicate with the summon contained within the facets. In Madain Sari, the Summoners had horns, like Princess Eiko does, that aided in communication and understanding between summons."

"But... my mother didn't have a horn," Sarah furrowed her brow.

"Ah, but she did, Princess Sarah," Doctor Tot leapt from his chair and walked just a few paces, glancing towards a charcoal sketch of the Alexandrian Castle just a year after the encounter with Alexander and the Invincible. "Long ago, Queen Brahne and King Heider, your maternal

grandparents, had a daughter named Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII.”

“Yes, my mother,” Sarah nodded.

“But it wasn’t your mother,” Doctor Tot shook his head, pacing a few more steps again and weaving between plush ottomans and stacks of books. “The first girl was the real princess of Alexandria. The true daughter born from Queen Brahne. And she died of an illness in her youth. That same year a young girl washed up from the ocean beside a grown woman who was no longer breathing. That little girl had a horn. And she was taken in and renamed after the recently deceased princess. Her horn was removed. And that is how your mother came to be the Queen of Alexandria. That is how the Summoning tribe came to conquer a throne, an unexpected change in a large plan.”

“You’re telling me my mother wasn’t born as a princess?” Sarah furrowed her brow, holding her arms out at her side. “It was all just a big mistake?”

“Well, it certainly was not a mistake entrusting your mother to become the Queen of Alexandria,” Doctor Tot smiled sadly. “But she was not born of royal blood. She was not expected to lead a

kingdom. But I like to believe, Princess, that everything happens for a reason.”

Sarah blinked rather vacantly. “I’m... I’m technically not really a princess...”

“Oh, but you are,” Doctor Tot told her with jubilance. “You’ve been born into it and fear not, you are beloved by everyone. I do not mean to cause internal conflict with your being, Princess Sarah. I simply feel if you wish to understand what Princess Arabella is also going through, this is what I must tell you.”

“Sarah,” Alex came down from her chair now. Her cheeks were cherry red as she came forth, still trying to process the entire story Doctor Tot had gone through. “If you don’t think you’re a princess, then what could you really be?”

“I... don’t know,” Sarah shrugged rather sheepishly, looking between her sister and the scholar. “Does there have to be a label? Can I not just be a person?”

“Princess Sarah, you are your own person at heart,” Doctor Tot assured her, ruffling his feathers for a moment. “Your mother was the finest princess and an even better queen. I have no doubt you can

do the same, whether you believe you're rightfully a princess or not.”

“How old was my mother when she found out the truth?”

“She was your age,” Doctor Tot told her.

The eldest sister felt goosebumps pucker across her skin. “If she was renamed... what was her *real* name?”

“Sarah.”

The princess turned around quickly, gasping sharply at the intrusion. Standing in the doorway was her father. He had been walking in the rain. Zidane’s blond hair was so dark, droplets falling from his slack jagged bangs. He had rolled the sleeves of his button-up and his skin still gleamed with rain.

“Your mother’s real name was Sarah,” He said again.

The rain thunked against the thick material of the umbrella that jutted out on either side of Zidane and Sarah. They were seated at an iron garden table

outside beside the river. A fog was beginning to rise again as it reached the late-afternoon. The cooks would be sorely disappointed to see very few of the royal family had chosen to not attend lunch. The guards were making their rounds beneath their own meager umbrellas, but walked leisurely, in no rush beneath the weather. Zidane simply watched his daughter. She sat across from him, slumped forward against the table with her arms crossed over each other. She seemed so hopelessly confused and conflicted.

Zidane reached for the tea the help insisted on bringing to them. It was like clockwork with anybody occupying the garden, rain or shine. He was glad they had brought it, though. Zidane felt like it bought him time to find his words. For as much as he had seamlessly sailed through as a young man taking on the world, it didn't seem half as scary as being confronted by an angry teenage girl. Zidane was patient in squeezing his lemons and didn't even mutter a curse word when some seeds fell in. He tilted his head back to take a drink and that's when Sarah's blue eyes met his.

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?" She asked, her voice deflated. "Did you think it was something better to keep away from me?"

“Sarah,” Zidane sighed, setting his tea cup down. ‘You know I didn’t mean anything bad with not telling you. You have to understand.’ Zidane sat forward. “I’ve been waiting for a long time, the *right* time to tell all three of you the whole story. But how am I supposed to know where to start?”

“I imagine this would be easier with Mother...” Sarah sat up straight now, remembering to cross her ankles. She then began fixing her own tea.

“You got that right...” Zidane tried not to sound so sour about the thought. He glanced fleetingly towards the river before stirring his tea as a distraction. “I would have told you before you became Queen, Sarah. And I would have told Arabella before she really began to notice.”

“Mother was a Summoner, too, though,” Sarah looked to him. “Why are you so frightened for Bella to be the same thing?”

“Eidolons are dangerous,” Zidane told her. He decided he couldn’t tip-toe anymore. It was his chance to say exactly what he wanted, as bluntly as he would like. “Not necessarily to the person who is capable of harnessing them. They are a threat to this world. Sarah, they can be used as weapons of mass destruction. Queen Brahne destroyed Lindblum and

Cleyra; she *stole* your mother's summons to do this. I didn't want people to see Bella in that way; as a ticking time bomb to world war. I can't bear the thought of anybody hurting her in the way they did your mother."

Sarah simply stared at her father, her heart beating in her chest. The story was dramatic with wildly changing ways of direction. And she felt she hadn't even uncovered half of what really happened. "Surely Aunt Eiko knows what she's doing."

"I sure hope so," Zidane said. "It was a matter of time, Sarah. Eiko only sped up the process."

"Daddy, could something bad happen like it did seventeen years ago?" Sarah asked, slowly and cautiously.

Zidane paused and pursed his lips. There was that awful stomach-churning feeling he had in his gut. It was always there, whether he was aware or not. It was a knot in his stomach that had come to him weeks before and had never gone away. It was peculiar and sent Zidane into turmoil.

"Honestly?" Zidane arched his eyebrows. Hesitantly, Sarah nodded. "I don't know."

9. Stir-Crazy

Chapter Nine

A sharp ragged scream echoed down the long and empty corridor. The few maids who scurried past winced at the sounds as they closed the large velvet curtains for the night. They were mindful to close as many doors behind them as possible to muffle sounds leaking out into the rest of the castle. They were orders directly from General Beatrix. As the maids raced away from the corridor leading to the Master Royal Chamber, they came across the General, who was ordering some help upstairs with trays of decadent treats and stuffed toys. Beatrix noticed the maids and turned towards them.

“Are the screams still loud?” She asked.

“Atrociously so, madam.”

“I shall go check,” Beatrix told them. “Please be sure the chefs toast marshmallows and fudge for Princess Arabella and Princess Sarah.”

The maids curtesied as Beatrix brushed past them. The moment she opened the large heavy door for the corridor, she felt her inside shake. The

screams echoed down the long vaulted ceilings. Beatrix had been in war before, but felt her insides shutter at the shouts she was forced to hear. She closed the door quickly behind her and grabbed the hilt of her sword out of habit. In the next moment, she barrelled forward, willing herself to the one long door at the other side of the corridor. She took a beat to collect herself, her eyes following the intricate carvings of ivy leaves and rose buds. Beatrix knew the design like the back of her hand, but still took time to admire it. Another ear-curling scream rang out, however, and startled Beatrix. She came in through the door, entering the spacious royal chamber.

It was clean and organized, as usual. But the chaotic state of the people inhabitating it betrayed the room itself. Immediately to the right was a tea table that had been cluttered in linens. In fact, every surface had. Folded and bundled linens waited at the tip of the four nurses hands. An elderly man directed them like a chorus as he leaned over the poster bed. The silky sheets had been discarded all over the floor. Standing on the outskirts of the scene was King Zidane. He lamely held a pillow at his side, simply watching the scene unfold. Beatrix came

to his side and gripped his arm, snapping him from his trance.

“What are you doing just standing here?” Beatrix asked. “You’ve seen childbirth twice before.”

Zidane’s face was pale and he laughed breathily at the comment. “Yeah but is it supposed to get easier? You’re a woman, Beatrix. Doesn’t that make you hurt between your legs to see?”

Beatrix pursed her lips and glanced fleetingly towards Dagger. Her face was flushed, tears bubbling in the corners of her eyes. She then looked back at Zidane. “There’s a reason I never had any.”

“Yeah, with Steiner’s kid it’d have a big ol’ head.”

Beatrix could tell Zidane was doing his best to distract himself in the moment, so she directed him to the tea table, clearing the linens from his sight and also confiscating his pillow. Beatrix sat down with him, glancing at the bed to be sure there was nothing in view. Dagger’s cries continued to fill the chamber and with each one, Beatrix could see it was like twisting a knife in Zidane’s side.

“Please tell me Sarah and Arabella have fallen asleep,” Zidane looked to Beatrix through his bangs.

“They refused to even lie down,” Beatrix reported. “They’re chanting and dancing about receiving a baby brother.”

“Oh, the jury has decided,” Zidane arched his eyebrows.

*“You don’t think this one’s a boy?” Beatrix asked.
“Third time’s a charm, right?”*

A scream interrupted their conversation and Zidane tensed, holding his breath for nearly three seconds after the yells receded. “Boy or girl, this is the last one.”

Beatrix grinned. “You said that when Arabella was born.”

“Well, I mean it this time.”

A moment passed before suddenly, a baby’s cry erupted and Dagger’s screams fell away. Zidane was to his feet in an instant, his chair scraping across the marble floors. The maids hurriedly began wiping Dagger’s flushed cheeks and combing her hair from her sticky face. They helped arrange her in bed as the doctor bundled the baby quickly,

wiping the blood from it's face. Humbly, he turned towards Zidane, extending the wailing child out towards him.

“Your Majesty,” He said proudly. “It’s a girl. Congratulations.”

Cautiously, Zidane came forward. Though he had experienced this twice before, the immensity of the moment never eluded him. He still could only marvel at the idea of birth when his entire life had only taunted him with death. Carefully, he cradled the baby against him and she hushed down, still squirming in her tight bundle. A wide grin slowly spread across the king’s face and he bobbed the baby in his arms.

“Well,” He looked to Beatrix. “The girl’s are gonna be pissed.”

Zidane went to Dagger’s bedside, climbing in beside her. Dagger was exhausted. It was late into the night now. She melted against Zidane, inhaling his intoxicating scent. Her slender fingers came down to graze the round cheek of the new princess. Zidane kissed Dagger’s forehead tenderly, pressing his cheek against her head.

“What’re we gonna call her?” Zidane asked in a hushed voice. Slowly, Dagger’s dazzling brown eyes, the color of the best coffee to find on Gaia, came to look at his. The eye contact was fleeting, however, and all sights went to the baby. Her eyes were open and she was hiccuping. Her big curious eyes were the color of Dagger’s. When their eyes met, the baby couldn’t help but smile. “Whoa, Sarah and Arabella didn’t do that.”

*“She’s the happiest baby I’ve ever delivered!”
The doctor proclaimed.*

Dagger gazed around the room before looking back to Zidane. She nearly fell in love with him all over again every time she stared at him. Her free hand came forward to graze his arm. “I want to name her Alexandra. After the first princess of the throne of Alexandria.”

“The happiest princess to ever sit on the throne...” Beatrix recited.

“Alexandra,” Zidane echoed, nodding his head and looking down at the baby who was fascinated by everything around her. “I like it. It’s got—” He stopped talking abruptly, looking at the baby in almost a stunned fashion.

“What is it?” Dagger sat up, but winced in pain.

“Zidane, what’s wrong?” Beatrix’s heart pounded in her chest at the shocked face of Zidane.

Slowly, he unwound the towel that encased the small princess. He held her against his chest as the towel drooped. Everyone in the room gasped in awe. “She... she has a tail,” Dagger whispered, staring in wonder. It was small, the same sandy blonde as Zidane’s. And it wiggled intermittently.

“Well,” Zidane grinned, laying her back down in his arms, “finally a little credit for my work.”

Finally, the sun had returned. When Sarah awoke to a sliver of light coming through her curtains, she felt as if she hadn’t slept much at all. All night, her dreams were turbulent. Memories of her mother flooded in, plus wild recreations of what her mother and father possibly suffered through in their youth. Sarah felt foolish. She folded her hands over her stomach, staring at the tall ceilings above her. For the last sixteen years of her life, she realized she hadn’t the faintest clue as to what being a princess really meant. She lived a life of dumb luxury. Sarah came to the conclusion she didn’t know what the

world was really like and she felt it was important to a princess who was destined to help lead it one day. Instead, Sarah was worrying about birthday bashes and dinner parties. When her mother had been a princess, those had to have been the last things on her mind.

Sarah dressed hurriedly into a red dress that was not very elaborate. Quickly, she pinned her wavy locks to the crown of her head and left her chambers, her short heels thunking against the thick carpets. She was greeted by Alex in the sitting room, who was organizing her cards. Alex's eyes lit up when she saw her older sister.

"Sarah! Do you want to play Tetra Master after breakfast?" She asked, eagerly.

"Not today, Alex," Sarah stopped abruptly, her skirt waving back and forth. "I have things I need to do today."

"Oh no, like what?" Alex drooped at the idea. "You're just gonna disappear like Bella, too, huh, and leave me all alone?"

Sarah sighed and pursed her lips, coming to kneel beside the table with Alex. "We're not *leaving* you,

Alex. Sometimes we just have to have days to ourselves, okay?"

"Well, alright," Alex sighed. Sarah grinned and began towards the door. "Just don't do anything stupid!"

Sarah paused, lingering in the threshold. "I think I'm about to do something quite good, actually." And with that, she disappeared, letting the door thunk closed behind her. The youngest sister was quiet now, her interest in her cards feigning. Slowly, she lowered the vibrant cards to the table and wandered towards the wall-length windows. Down below, her eyes scanned through the aisles of hedges, watching the guards making their morning rounds. The thin gray clouds of the sky allowed the dewey sun to pierce through. It looked like a promising day in Alexandria, but the youngest princess couldn't help but not feel anywhere near excited about it.

Ever since Sarah's birthday over a week ago, nothing had seemed the same. Daily life in the castle suddenly seemed... off. She missed the days of happily being attached at her older sister's hips. Though Alex wasn't blind to the fact that maybe her big sister's didn't always want to be in her presence,

the young girl loved them all the more for putting up with her. Alex sighed, pressing her forehead against the glass. She used to thoroughly enjoy when visitors came to the castle. Now the idea brought her dread that they desired to change yet another thing about her family. Alex decided in that moment that she never wanted to grow up. She didn't want to be like Sarah and Bella, always preoccupied with other things. Alex only wanted to have fun. She'd be fine having her cards in her hands for the rest of her life.

When Zidane exited the corridor leading from his chambers, he was surprised to see Sarah pacing back and forth, her arms crossed over her chest. The sound of the closing door halted her in her steps, however, and she looked towards her father with blue eyes that already knew what they wanted. It was barely even after sunrise and already Zidane was holding his breath for the first time that morning. Sarah approached her father with brisk steps and an intense look in her blue eyes.

“I would like to go to town today,” Sarah told him. “By myself.”

“What for?” Zidane furrowed his brow, rather blind sided by his daughter’s sudden gumption. “You know Beatrix and Steiner won’t be okay with that.”

“Daddy,” Sarah glanced towards a nearby maid who was busy pruning a tall plant. Her silver scissors glinted in the candlelight. “I’m not really a princess. I should—”

“Let me stop you there,” Zidane held his hands up. Sarah looked quite displeased with him. “Sarah, you *are* a princess. Two days ago, you would have thought nothing differently. I didn’t want to keep the secrets from you anymore, but you can’t let it change you are and have always been.”

Sarah shook her head. “I disagree. When Doctor Tot told me the truth about Mother... I felt... relieved. I finally thought for once in my life that I could just be *normal*, Daddy. That’s all I want.”

“You are normal,” Zidane told her. ‘And besides, what do you want to do in town?’ Sarah was quiet for a few moments before she sighed and turned on the balls of her feet, her heels thunking against the marble floors. Zidane was behind her in a moments notice, grabbing her shoulder and turning her towards him. “Sarah, stop. What is this about?” Her

face was rather flushed now, her cheeks heating up as she fidgeted beneath his gaze. Zidane's tense body relaxed at her flustered state and gently, he combed a lock from the frame of Sarah's face. "This is about Dante, isn't it?"

"Yes and no," Sarah shrugged sheepishly. "I just... I've never been allowed to just roam. I can't go anywhere by myself. *Somebody* always has to be there, like I'm some precious thing that cannot be harmed. But the truth is, Daddy, I'm no different from the rest of them. We bleed the same blood as them. Even if I am a princess, what kind of ruler would I be if I didn't immerse myself in the world at some point, like you and Mother did in your youth?"

Zidane pursed his lips and shifted between his feet. Sarah was just as charismatic and logical as her mother was. Despite taking entirely after Zidane physically, he couldn't help but see Dagger's entire personality bursting from the seams of Sarah's being. And this time, Sarah's logic had him over a barrell. How could he stand there and deny her the liberty that he had known for nearly half his life? How could he say no to those big round eyes that craved what her mother did just seventeen years before? But again, that gut feeling clenched in his stomach and his brain became flummoxed. Zidane

wanted nothing more than to protect her and his desire to hold all girls in his arms for eternity grappled him. But he knew that couldn't be fair. How was that right?

“Why don’t you and I go to town together?” Zidane offered. “And I won’t let a single guard go with us.”

“Really?” Sarah’s eyes lit up.

“That’s if you wanna hang out with your dad,” Zidane grinned sheepishly.

“Oh, Daddy!” Sarah flung her arms around her neck. “Thank you, thank you!”

“Are you *insane*?” Beatrix threw her arms out at her side. Zidane and the general were in the far corner of the sprawling garden, just outside a barrack housing that solely belonged to Beatrix and Steiner. The general was absolutely stunned and bordering on the edge of furious. She looked towards the king as if he was no more than a naughty boy who needed a slap on the wrist. “You just promised her that? Like I’d allow it? You’re out of your mind and it’s out of the question.”

“Hey, *I’m* her father. I should be allowed to do what I want with my kids,” Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. “She’s got a point, Beatrix. We never leave this castle unless it’s to fly away to another one. I thought I was the only one in this place going stir-crazy! And besides, Sarah could use a nice day out. The sun is shining. I’m sure the market is lively.”

“You’re not taking her to see that boy, are you?”

“What’s that matter?” Zidane shrugged. “I heard his mom sews mocassins. Sounds like a good investment for the approaching winter.”

Beatrix drew her lips into a tight line. “Forgive me, Zidane, but I’ve held my tongue far too long for the past few weeks. Things are changing. *Rapidly*. The world as we know it is turning a new leaf and none of us know for certain what that new side will bring. The princesses are growing up very quickly and whether you like to consider the burden or not, the world is *counting* on these three girls. Sarah’s choices matter, Zidane.”

Zidane felt his face tighten. “So, you’re sayin’ Sarah should be aiming higher, huh? That this boy is just some riff-raff ’cause she’s a damn princess? I know you probably thought the same all those years

ago with Dagger and I don't care if you never actually came to terms with it, Beatrix, but Sarah's my daughter and if he's what makes her happy, I don't care what anyone has to say. You, of all people, should understand and respect that, Beatrix."

"I say it out of care," Beatrix told him. "*I am* their godmother."

"Beatrix, I count on you for a lot of things," Zidane shook his head. "You're the only reason this castle even operates as seamlessly as it does. You've helped out so immensely with the girls, but at the end of the day, we can't all make decisions you'll be entirely happy with. Let Sarah have this chance to go out and be free for a little bit. One time seeing this boy outside the walls isn't going to end with some elaborate wedding. She's got her own life to lead, too. And her own choices to make."

Beatrix crossed her arms over her chest, still looking rather pensive. "You get five hours."

"No way," Zidane laughed now. He couldn't help it. He looked at his flustered friend who had lowered her arms to her side, curling her hands into fists. "You're not putting a curfew on us. Beatrix, we'll be fine. What, did I forget how to use a knife?"

“Things are different, you fool,” Beatrix said despite Zidane still chuckling. “You’re not just that boy anymore from the past, you’re—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zidane waved his hand dismissively, a grin still plastered across his face. “I’m King Zidane Tribal the First of Alexandria. I’ve heard it before. I’m over it. See ya later, Beatrix.” Zidane turned now and casually strolled away. Beatrix’s dark eyes followed him like a hawk until the end of his tail disappeared after sight around a hedge. She let out an exasperated sigh.

“Damn him.”

The beautiful afternoon light shed through the study room. The walls were packed with old books shoehorned on top of each other. All the tables were covered in scrolls and open books. Ink wells and feathers were well in abundance at an arm lengths away in any part of the room. Bella sat at a small writing desk, facing towards Eiko who was lecturing in front of her with an open book on a wooden stand. Her mother’s study journal was open on the desk, along with Bella’s own that was slowly taking shape to be filled with her own thoughts and lessons.

Bella's eyes, however, were trained towards the windows, watching the doves flutter by. Absent mindedly, she whisked her feather back and forth in her hand, uncaring of any dribbles of ink.

“... thunder and lightening have long been desired magical abilities to acquire since the day the first spark of magic was discovered on Gaia,” Eiko said, placing her finger to the page of her crumbling textbook. “When black magic was first being studied, it accidentally awakened an old soul from world’s unknown who revealed themselves as a man with a long flowing beard and beautiful silk robes. Though he could be very destructive, his soul was tame and he would not allow just anybody to wield his powers...” Eiko paused, staring at the distracted princess. “Bella, are you listening? Who am I talking about?”

Bella kept her eyes on the windows, trying not to sigh in frustration or exhaustion. Slowly, she sat up straight, looking towards her tutor. “You’re talking about Ramuh. I already know. My mother wrote about it in her journal.” Bella lazily turned the pages of her mother’s notebook, stopping on the page where her mother had taken the liberty of drawing Ramuh with his big beard. “He strikes with a

Judgement Bolt. His soul resides in Periodots and is one of the toughest Eidolons to ask to serve you.”

Bella sighed and came to her feet. Her black velvet dress fell heavily on her shoulders as she wandered to the windows, looking out over the garden at the magnificent day. Eiko pursed her lips, watching the stiff back of her mentee. Finally, she huffed, flicking her thick purple plait over her shoulder and shutting the dusty book.

“Maybe we should take a break,” Eiko suggested. “Eidolons cannot be understood with a distracted mind.”

“How many days and hours must I come here to be tutored?” Bella asked, looking over her shoulder. Her dark inky hair swished back and forth. “It’s not that I’m uninterested, Auntie Eiko, it’s just... consuming. And sometimes I leave with less clarity than I had the day before.”

Eiko smiled gently and came to join Bella at the window. Together, the two princesses watched the hustle and bustle of the mid-afternoon shift changes in the garden. “It is always hard in the beginning, Arabella. I was much younger than you when I was being taught these things and I remember clearly the days I was very lost and confused,” Eiko took in a

deep breath as fleeting memories of the past whizzed by her. “It’s hard sometimes to understand how all of this information relates to you, Arabella. But I promise you, your lessons are about to start making sense.”

Bella glanced towards the side Eiko’s bright face. “What do you mean?”

Eiko reached into a small velvet pouch secured to her waistband. She opened her palm, revealing a small gem shard that glinted in the bright sunshine. “Do you recognize this one?” Bella was quiet for a moment and Eiko’s grin only got wider. “Don’t tell me you forgot our gem lesson?”

“It’s a Periodot,” Bella said. “We were just talking about it.”

“Yes, you’re right, Miss Sassy-Pants,” Eiko clucked, tucking the shard back into her pouch. “And tonight, you’re going to speak with the old man who resides in this shard.”

Bella turned completely to Eiko now with wide brown eyes. “I’m going to...?”

“That’s right,” Eiko nodded confidently, her plait beating against the nape of her neck. “You’re going to actually summon something.”

Bella's insides stewed between excitement and anxiety. It would be the first time she held a gem and called something before her that wasn't a staircase. The idea was wildly enticing. But she couldn't help but consider the fear factor in her father. Would summoning a magical entity be wise? Would Bella be able to stay in control and calm? Bella looked back out the window, her heart thudding in her chest. Her eyes paused, however, when she spied her father and Sarah sitting in the gondola, leisurely making their way across the river.

"Look, there's Daddy and Sarah," She pointed. 'I wonder where they're going. They never just leave the castle.' Bella glanced towards the door. "I miss so much tucked away in this vault..."

Eiko folded her hands behind her back, strolling back to her pedestal. "I'm sorry, Arabella. But sacrificing the present time to make way for future time is necessary. If you're going to be summoning tonight at high moon, there's still things I must go over with you. You should be glad to have things to occupy your time as a princess. What else are you needed for?"

Bella shrugged now, feeling rather deflated at the sound of Eiko's textbook opening again. "I don't

know... playing Tetra Master or Hungry, Hungry Oglop with Alex sounds like fun.”

Eiko was quiet for a moment as she found her place in her textbook. “Sit down, Arabella. There is some lore I must tell you. As a summoner, it is important to recognize and understand all lores of Eidolons. This story is about a hero named Joseph and his daughter.”

Bella watched as across the wide river, Zidane hoisted Sarah from the boat. Her sister carefully smoothed her skirt before the tall iron wrought gates opened and they disappeared beneath the thick foliage of trees. Bella sighed before returning to her desk.

Alex found herself wandering down the quiet and empty hallways in the back portion of the castle. Many of the rooms here were unused and mostly forgotten. They were decorated ornately with old heirlooms and antique furniture. Large paintings and tapestries covered the walls from generations before. When the castle had been open to the public over one hundred years ago, these rooms had been necessary as means to entertain their loyal subjects.

Now, the rooms were empty of life and gathering dust. The princesses rarely traveled these halls. In their youth, they used to play make believe they were brave warriors discovering uncharted territories. Truth be told, the old paintings and furniture gave the princesses the spooks. It was so eerie and many times had them complaining to their father of the creepiness. But Alex didn't seem much to mind as she wandered in her bored state. Despite being unused saved for a handful of times throughout the year, the maids made sure it was marvelously clean with polished floors and swept rugs.

Cautiously, Alex stopped at the last door on the left before another winding hallway and glanced back and forth to be sure she was alone. Slowly, she gripped the ivory doorknob and turned it over. It creaked horrendously loud, making the young girl wince. Luckily, the candles were lit, dimly illuminating the room with furniture covered in white linens. Alex couldn't remember the last time she had come to the room. She guessed nearly six months. As she languidly strolled through the room, she couldn't hold herself back from the childish insistence of whisking every linen from the furniture she passed. The streets crumpled on the floor in the

wake of Princess Alex. She uncovered a harp with extravagant carvings to mimick a flowering garden of lillies. The silky strings glinted in the candlelight. Then there was a kettledrum suspended on golden legs that had a glossy sheen. Flutes of wood and nickle, ukueleles with delicate hand paintings. Finally, Alex paused at the back of the room, standing before the largest piece of furniture. Alex didn't even wait. She snatched the white linen into her hand and pulled with all her might to snap the wide sheet towards her. It crumpled across her black buckle shoes and she found herself staring at a large gleaming piece of mahogany wood. A red rose was painted along the side. Alex's fingers traced it as she came around it to find a bench. Carefully, she eased the cover open, revealing the clean ivory keys. The grand piano was very old but very important to the castle. It's been apart of the royal bloodline for as long as Alexandria had stood.

Alex held her breath for a few moments, cocking her head between the instruments to look at the hallway. There was no sound. No clattering armor. Or swords shifting on hips. Alex was completely alone. She eased herself onto the piano bench, running her palms along the velvet cushion. She looked up and down the black and white keys.

Tenderly, she reached forward, just barely pushing a few keys down. Faintly, the tingle of a note lifted into the air. Again, Alex pushed the keys, just a little harder, and grinned when the piano returned it with a pleasant warm noise. Steiner had encouraged Alex to pursue the piano when she was younger. He had played in his youth for therapy from an injury and Steiner insisted it really helped him, though he no longer played anymore. In some way, the sensation of the ivory keys beneath Alex's hands reminded her of her mother— what little she could conjure up, anyway.

And so, Princess Alex began playing a gentle melody, as simple as a narrow stream in an evergreen forest. It was one of the first pieces she had ever learned. It had been performed in the old days at wedding ceremonies and traditional right of passages. She was careful when she began, but eventually, her small hands moved fluidly, as if they had never forgotten their way along the keys. Her vivid imagination procured images of what she believed her parents wedding day had been like. Surely her mother had worn the finest silks and the fluffiest dress with a train that trailed out of sight. Alex could see her father dressed crisply, his hair combed. What a proclamation it must have been.

She felt her fingers coming down with more force now and the piano cried out in the vacant room, drenching the walls in a music it hadn't been bathed with in months or perhaps years. Alex perched on that velvet cushion, one of dozens, but the only one who carried it on. She played the piano as it was always supposed to be played; with a passion and a tender care. With a musician whose whole self sank into the tips of their fingers and skimmed the keys with a direct idea of what they want. You may not be able to control life, but you can control the sounds that echo from a piano's chasmic body.

Tenderly, Alex pressed the final keys of the song, having it slowly fade out. The sound of the piano resonated in the small room before the stuffy atmosphere of the rather low ceilings slowly began to take back over. Alex breathed for the first time in two minutes she realized and she blinked vacantly at the keys. But the sound of clapping had her head snapping up. Standing in the middle of the room, amongst all the clutter, stood Steiner. He was smiling widely, his hands coming together with great enthusiasm.

"Princess, that was magnificent! You have no clue how pleased I am to see you playing again," Steiner told her, coming towards the piano and

sliding his gloved hand along the glossy wood. “You exude poise and grace when you play the piano.”

Alex was quite startled and even more embarrassed. She couldn’t believe Steiner, in all of his armor, could sneak into the room. “Uncle Rusty, what are you doing back here?”

“I was in the armory. I heard you from down the hall.”

“I... I didn’t think anybody really came back here,” Alex shrugged sheepishly.

“Princess, I insist you practice more,” Steiner continued to smile. “You have a gift. You mustn’t throw it away.”

“When’s the last time anyone even played this thing?” Alex furrowed her bold brow.

Steiner looked over the piano, again caressing the wood gently. “You know, your mother played the piano in her youth. She took great pleasure in it. But she stopped when she grew older and had more obligations.”

“Uncle Steiner...” Alex sounded so meek in the next moment. Steiner gazed over the willowly girl slouched in the elaborate piano bench. “I’m... I’m

scared to grow up. I don't want to, actually. I don't want anything to change. I'm scared of losing somebody else."

Steiner's armor clattered as he came to kneel beside the bench. Tenderly, he reached out and pressed his hand to her arm. It reminded Steiner so long ago of the past. The insecurities of the beloved Master Vivi— his constant struggle with the concept of life and death. Master Vivi's turmoil was the first to rumble, but gravely the captain recounted everybody's wrestle with the innate process of life. And to that day, in the spirit of Master Vivi, Steiner took time to contemplate the concept many waking moments.

"Princess Sarah," He began gently. "Change is a natural part of life. We cannot stop it. But what we can do is always be ready to embrace it. For better or for worse, you'll find a way to make it work. And you never have to face it alone. We are here for you, Princess."

Alex tilted her head down, her wavy blonde hair framing her face. "I'm scared for Bella..."

Steiner had to restrain himself from tensing at the thought. Cooly, he licked his lips and gave Alex a

reassuring pat. "You have my word, Princess:
Everything will be alright."

10. A Revolving Cage Door

Chapter Ten

The commotion of town was both exhilarating and foreign. Because it was such a beautiful day, many people were out soaking in the rays of sun while fitting in an afternoon of shopping, drinking, and snacking. Every where one looked, a merchant was shouting out their wares, bearing beautiful fur coats, interesting little trinkets, and even kebobs with all kinds of different meats skewed on it. Children raced beneath everyone's elbows, keeping balls and toys away from each other while giggling furiously. On the outskirts, little girls skipped rope and made art with chalk. Exotic people of all kinds of backgrounds leisurely shopped with bags dangling from their hands. Swords were admired, cigars were tested, and silk garments were held up into the sun. Different accents from around the world all blurred together into one big chant around the square. For Zidane, not a thing had changed. For Sarah, it was like she was experiencing an entirely new world that was only a few hundred yards away from her bedroom.

Zidane watched his daughter with keen interest as her eyes lit up at every sight. It was like Dagger seeing the Ice Cavern or Dali for the first time. Zidane smirked. It was rather sweet to watch. Sarah paused to look at hand-forged swords and she gasped in awe at the delicate cupcakes and cookies on display. She watched with envy as women tried on garments that would be considered unbecoming of a princess. Sarah wasn't entirely sure what to gawk at. It was all so mesmerizing and amazing.

“Oi, twelve gil per pound?!” A nearby man with a ratty coat complained. *“I ’an get it for six in Treno!”*

“Well,” The butcher curtly brought his large knife down through a hunk of meat. “Go back to Treno, then.”

“Oh, Albert, this coat is absolutely divine!” A woman cooed. Her brunette hair was piled atop her head, her make up bold and brazen. She cozied up in a large fox coat that glistened auburn in the afternoon light. “This is much softer than the mu coat I have back at home.”

“It’s far too expensive, Fiona,” An older gentleman said, leaning on his ivory cane. “You have plenty of fur coats, anyway.”

Sarah wound through all the aisles of vendors, observing them with great interest. She stopped at one booth and grinned, looking towards her father. “Look at that Tetra Master card right there,” She pointed towards one on a small stand that was vibrantly orange. It was of a large fireball creature. “Alex doesn’t have that one.”

She then turned around and gasped in awe, drawing her father’s attention. “Look, Daddy! These silk embroideries are so pretty.” Again, she cooed when she laid eyes on hand crafted blocks. ‘Wow, these are much too nice to just be toys!’ Sarah laughed with wonder and glanced around the market again with bright eyes, her sweet blonde hair tumbling down her back. Zidane was hot on her trail as she began into the alleyways, gazing up at the thatched roofs and smiling at the children playing marbles and hopscotch. “Daddy, this is amazing,” Sarah said, taking in a deep breath of fresh air. “I feel like I’ve never really known or appreciated Alexandria. And now I can!”

“Yeah,” Zidane smirked, trailing at his daughter’s side. “It hasn’t changed much. In fact, it’s just like it always has been.”

“I thought you grew up in Lindblum?” Sarah arched her eyebrows and threw a glance at him. The alleyway was beginning to curve, a shadow casting across the cobblestone.

“I did,” Zidane felt the nostalgia of his youth washing over him. He didn’t even mind the gutting anxiety that accompanied it. “But we came to Alexandria every now and then for a night out.”

“You and Uncle Blank and Uncle Marcus and Uncle Cinna...” Sarah listed off, folding her hands behind her back. She swung her wiry shoulders back and forth as a cool breeze came through the alley. “You sound like you’ve had such an exciting life, Daddy, and here I am wowed by something as simple a market day in the town I grew up in.”

Zidane dug his hands into his trousers, glancing into windows sporting lacy hankeys and ties. “You and your sister’s were the most exciting thing to happen to me.”

Sarah shot him a look. “That sounds like a lie.”

“Hey, I’m glad to have you three,” Zidane grinned at her apparent exasperation. It was a gentle reflection Dagger’s own impatience. “Wouldn’t trade you three for anything in this world.”

Sarah abruptly halted in the next moment and Zidane nearly walked right past her. He paused behind her, looking towards the clean window that glowed in the bright afternoon light. Zidane arched his eyebrows, cocking his head to look at the wares. Several different types of shoes were on display. Mocassins, ballet flats, boots with intricate belts. Zidane looked at the store's sign. *The Bare Foot*. He stepped up beside his daughter now, who was bashfully blushing at the shoes.

"I'm guessin' this is the place?" Zidane asked, still with his hands casually jammed in his pockets. He glanced to Sarah. "Dante, right?"

"Y... yes, Dante Bare," Sarah nodded.

"Huh," Zidane glanced up and down the alley. 'Lucky last name.' There was more silence. Distantly, children's laughter rang out over the rooftops. "Well... do you wanna go inside?" Sarah looked at him, absolutely flummoxed.

"What?" Sarah's face heated up at the thought. "I don't know...! Is that... is that lady-like of me? Would I be too much of a distraction?"

Zidane grinned, though on the inside he was in turmoil at the thought of his little girl growing up.

He strode forward towards the door, but Sarah let out a little ‘eep’ stopping him in his tracks. Sarah was usually so calm and collected. It was cute, in a way, to see her so timid and flustered.

“Daddy, I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

“Why not?” Zidane shrugged. “Isn’t this why you wanted to come to town today?”

“I mean,” Sarah glanced towards a couple walking by. “I... I don’t know.”

“Come on,” Zidane smiled and pushed the door open. A small bell chimed. “They know we’re here. No going back now.” Zidane was certain in that moment that Sarah would bolt away. Her face was hot with a mixture of embarrassment and nervousness. Finally, however, she gave in and hesitantly followed her father into the small cool shop.

The small windows overlooking the alleys were open to allow the fresh breeze in. The shoe shop was modest and quaint with honey brown wood floors that ran the length of the small shop and freshly painted walls that were a vanilla white. A steep and narrow staircase lead to the annex above the shop. Several decadent shoes laid about, some that were

more modest in design and price. Zidane glanced around at the several boots before a back door opened and an older gentleman appeared with slick salt and pepper hair. Small pointed ears stuck out from the sides of his head. He was wearing a worn leather apron and grinned in a friendly manner before stopping short of the counter. Immediately, he bowed.

“Your Majesty, Your Highness...!” He stood up straight with his broad shoulders. ‘What an honor! What can I do for you today?’ The man was still quite reeling and looked between Sarah and Zidane’s matching blue eyes. “Are you... in the market for new shoes?”

Zidane glanced to his boots, scuffing them along the polished floor. “Well, I guess now that you mention it... a new pair of boots for the winter would be great.”

The merchant smiled and bowed again. “My wife just finished the newest collection of winter boots, Your Majesty. Surely we have something to accomodate you.”

“Great,” Zidane nodded, glancing towards Sarah. Her eyes were distracted with the intricate

Alexandrian crest embroideries that draped the walls. “Which ones are they?”

“Well, actually, they have not quite gone on the shelves yet,” The man arched his eyebrows. ‘They are in the backroom. Please, Your Majesty, I insist you meet my talented wife and daughters.’ He wrapped his arm around Zidane’s shoulders, guiding him past the counter like they had known each other their entire lives. “These boots are the newest fashion from Treno! Beautiful, shiny pleated leather with fox fur lining and handwove laces that reach past the ankle for a more durable fit!”

Zidane looked over his shoulder, gesturing for Sarah to follow. Promptly, her legs began to work and she was hot on the trail of her father’s gesture. The merchant stopped short of the door and laughed sheepishly, looking between Zidane and Sarah.

“My apologies. I overlooked formalities,” He bowed deeply now. “My name is Lucen Bare. It is an honor to make your acquaintances. My wife, Dinora, and I moved from Lindblum quite some time ago. It’s where we’ve raised our children. I would love for you to meet them. This is, after all, a family business.”

“Well, actually,” Zidane grinned and wrapped his arm around his nervous daughter’s tense shoulders. Her blue eyes looked to him with a fear of the unknown. “We’re here because it seems your son has caught my daughter’s eye. I’d love to meet the rest of your family if it means Sarah could see Dante again.”

Lucen was astounded into silence for a few beats before shaking his head in near disbelief. “My Dante...?” He whispered, like it couldn’t be true. “At the Princess’ Birthday Gala?”

“Sounds like he was quite a hit.”

Lucen sputtered for a moment before he gripped the bronze doorknob. “My wife will be thrilled to hear!” He threw the door open to a rather spacious room. The windows were small and far in between. The linen curtains floated in the afternoon breeze. A fireplace was stoked where the family had a stu boiling. The rest of the room was cluttered with tables and stools. Clunky machines disregarded in corners. Closest to the door an older woman with tan skin and pointed ears sat handstitching a fur cuff to the top of a boot. “Dinora, my love, the King and Princess are here.”

“Sweetheart, you really must stop telling those jokes,” Dinora clucked, her eyes still trained on her work. She finally came to a stopping point and looked over her progress. “The children are quite tired of them.” When she looked towards her husband, however, she gasped sharply, banging her knee against the table and cursing loudly.

That roused the attention of three wiry tanned girls, the carbon copies of their mother, from their needlework on boot linings. They sat huddled by the window with teas and fruit juices cluttered between them. They wore bonnets that held back their thick brunette hair.

“Dad’s right, it *is* the Princess and King!” One howled, leaping up from her stool.

The workshop was seemingly thrown into chaos. Dinora rose from the bench and removed her bonnet, modestly combing her dark hair from her face. She clutched the fabric beneath her hand and came around the table. “My apologies, Your Majesty, Your Highness. My husband is quite the joker. Oh, dear, I wish we had taken more mind in our clutter today.”

“It’s no problem,” Zidane waved his hand dismissively. “You do some magnificent work, Dinora.”

“Oh, Your Majesty,” Her cheeks flushed red. “You are too kind. Please, may I offer you two a cup of tea? Perhaps some lemon cake I baked yesterday?”

“Dinora!” Lucen rushed forward, gripping her arms and grappling her attention. “They’re here for Dante. He has his father’s charms!”

“Again, you *must* be joking with me,” Dinora sighed, pressing a slender finger to her temple.

“No, madam, he is telling the truth,” Sarah finally found her voice. Her knees were nearly knocking together, however. “I... I am here to see Dante.”

Dinora was just as stunned as her husband had been minutes before. Dinora looked between all her daughter’s, who stared with bright colorful eyes. She glanced around the quiet workshop before laying her eyes back on Sarah. “He... he is in the forging room. I shall fetch him. Lucen, please entertain our guests.”

“Your Majesty, please allow me to show you our newest boot. Perhaps you know your size?” Lucen guided Zidane towards the large stove in the corner where several bulky shelves were erected. Shoes of all kinds, flashy with silver pins, and modest with

simple pleating were proudly displayed, promising the family a winter of prosperity.

Sarah hugged herself at her elbows, looking around the room. Beautiful quilts were folded up with hand embroidered tea towels dangling over the edges. The family worked with their hands and it showed. Childish drawings were taped to the wall above the father's workshop. Sarah smiled meekly at the semblance of a normal family life tucked beneath those shallow ceilings. She gasped in the next moment when she realized three elbow height girls were at her side with big curious eyes.

“Are you gonna marry our brother?”

“He can be a real jerk sometimes and pull pigtails!”

“He unscrews the salt at dinner so you ruin your whole supper!”

“He’s got these wax tarantulas that he puts on your pillow!”

“And sometimes he hangs the bath towels where we can’t reach them!”

“Girls!” Lucen shouted from across the room.
“Show some hospitality, would you?”

“Yes, father,” The girl’s said in unison, folding their hands together.

The back door of the workshop opened, revealing another spacious room with hot furnaces and glossy metal tabletops. A young man, who was the walking copy of his own father, appeared beside Dinora. His black hair was shaggy, falling around the frame of his face. When his eyes lay on Sarah, he paused before he began slowly discarding his gloves on a table.

“Sarah?”

“Hi, Dante,” Coyly, Sarah folded her hands together and tilted her head. Zidane looked up from lacing his boots, watching as his daughter swayed like she was simply floating on air. He sat up, pressing his elbows into his knees. Lucen noticed his stopping and turned, watching in awe at the thought of his son becoming somewhat important to the princess. Zidane’s heart beat ferociously in his chest. It was so unexpected to him—he didn’t realize it would cause any kind of a stir inside of him. He pursed his lips at the thoughts of all his daughter’s wildly different lives. How could that happen when they all grew up under the same roof? When they were practically always together and only slept

twelve feet away from each other, how could they all be such different people? Zidane shook away the thoughts of his past, memories of blond haired and blue eyed people with blank expressions whirled by.

Dante cleared his throat sheepishly, “What brings you here? I... I mean, what can I do for you?”

Sarah glanced around at the audience surrounding them, blush gathering across the bridge of her nose. “Perhaps there is somewhere private we could speak?” Sarah cocked her head around his broad shoulders. “Perhaps I could watch you work for a little bit?”

Dinora cradled Dante’s head against her chest, grinning nearly ear to ear. “Oh, Dante, the Princess has come to see your enormous gift of making horse shoes and chocobo saddles!”

Sarah looked over her shoulder at her father. When Zidane realized eyes had turned on him, he sat up straight. “Why don’t you stay for a little bit, Sarah? I can come back later. Say, two hours?” Zidane glanced at Lucen. “Besides, I want to go break my boots in. These are great.”

Lucen was nearly hopping up and down on the spot. Excitement threatened to burst from every

seam of his being. “Yes, Your Majesty, it would be an *honor* to allow the Princess to observe Dante’s work! Please, take your time. We will treat her kindly, I swear, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not worried,” Zidane grinned as best he could, finishing the lace on his boots. He flexed his ankle back and forth before standing up. “Well, Lucen, Dinora— thank you. You’ve been most kind. Sarah, mind your manners.”

Sarah’s eyes were dancing in joy at the prospect. She looked at Zidane and reached out, squeezing his wrist. Zidane could only grin back before he leaned forward, pecking her forehead. It felt so foreign walking out of the shop, onto the street, without Sarah. It all happened so fast, but Zidane had looked at Dante and hadn’t felt so worried after all. Dante had that look in his eye that Zidane liked to think gleamed in his own when he looked at Dagger. The apple of his eye. It was no secret Dante fancied Sarah. And Zidane wasn’t about to let Sarah marry the Count of Treno’s wiry son.

He crossed his arms over his chest, wandering further down the alley. *They’re not going to just get married, that’s crazy. They only just met. And it’s the first boy Sarah’s ever interacted with. Of course*

she's going to be intrigued by everything about him. Zidane smirked. *It's how I reeled their mom in.*

As Zidane came around the corner, he was shoulder checked by someone cutting it diagonally. Zidane was ripped from his thoughts and was turning to yell an insult when he was greeted by two familiar faces. It was Blank and Marcus. They seemed surprised to see Zidane, glancing up and down the alley.

“Zidane?” Blank arched his eyebrows, holding his arms out at his side. “What’re you doin’ just out on the streets? Shouldn’t you be at the castle?”

“I needed a day off,” Zidane smirked, digging his hands into his pockets. “I’ve got a better question. What are you two doin’ in Alexandria?”

Marcus gestured over his shoulder. “Ruby’s theatre is havin’ a little show and a happy hour. We figured we’d go for the drinks, if anything.”

“Yeah, Ruby is awful at acting,” Blank laughed. “She can’t shake that rustic accent.”

“Why don’t you come?” Marcus offered. “Boss is there already.”

“Oh,” Zidane straightened his shoulders. “I haven’t seen the old man for nearly two years now. How’s he doin’?”

“I mean, he’s alright,” Blank shrugged. “His health has definitely declined. He lost sight in his right eye last year and he travels like hell. But he really wanted to come support Ruby, so he grinned and beared the trip. He’d really like to see you, though, Zidane. Baku asks about you all the time.”

“I’m surprised,” Zidane scuffed his shiny new boots to the cobblestone. Overhead, a flock of white doves whizzed by. “I gave him so much hell and a rough ride all those years ago. And now I’m some snooty royal. Figured he’d be done with me.”

“Well,” Marcus grinned. “Definitely not the case. And let’s prove it over a cocktail.”

“Or five,” Blank threw in.

The mid-afternoon was waning by. The large mahogany grandfather clock clicked loudly in the room. Each pulse had Princess Bella nearly flinching as she tried to focus on reading the text in front of her. She pressed her hands to her forehead, her eyes

trained down but her mind swinging in time with the gold pendulum that taunted her across the room. Behind her, muted heels to the carpet approached and Eiko clucked her tongue from over Bella's shoulder.

"Arabella, you were on this page when I checked on you five minutes ago," Eiko shook her head. "You're literate. Use your gift and get a move on."

Bella closed the book in the next moment, falling against the back of her chair. "I would like a break. I want to go for a walk or go find Daddy or something."

"Your father's not here," Eiko walked towards her own desk, sifting through her to-do list for the day's lesson. "He and Sarah went to town."

"Well, I need to leave this room for a little bit," Bella came to her feet.

"We still have things to discuss."

"The sun's not even close to setting," Bella shook her head.

"Arabella," Eiko stepped forward. "Today is not the day to be in a foul mood. It is never wise to cast summons in an angry way."

“You should give the summons more credit,” Bella said, looking at the door with great longing. “Ramuh is wise. He knows nobody is happy when they’re simply locked away in a room.”

The bullheaded Princess of Lindblum pursed her lips. “Nobody is keeping you locked away, Arabella. You will thank me one day for all of this. You are securing peace for all of Gaia. People will look up to you one day as a leader who keeps unity for all as a sacred notion.”

“I’m going for a walk,” Bella declared, crossing the room now.

“Arabella! Arabella, please,” Eiko called but the princess allowed the door to thunk heavily behind her. Eiko let out a huff and fell across a brocade couch, tilting her head back against all the throw pillows. The afternoon rays bled through the wall-length windows and across her porcelain skin. She sighed as she withdrew a gen, holding it up to watch the light bend through its many facets.

A weapon of mass destruction, Zidane called it... She thought, twisting the Periodot between her slender fingers. While simultaneously being the key to unity in all of Gaia...

A cool chill gripped at Blank, Marcus, and Zidane's ankles as they descended the short dusty cobblestone stairs to Ruby's makeshift underground theatre. The janky wood door creaked as Blank lead the way in. The theatre was warmly lit with candles along the walls. Large round tables were sporadically placed on the floor leading up to the lifted stage. The room was more than equipped to house eighty or one-hundred people but only seven lonely souls lingered at tables with drinks.

“Cinna!” Blank pointed towards a table where the small and wiry man sat with a much heavier and bulkier set man who had his back to the group, his eyes trained on the stage. “Order another drink! We got company!” Blank thrust Zidane forward and everyone in the bar looked with an air of astoundment.

“The King!” The ratty bartender squeaked. “Your Majesty, you’re here for the show?”

“I, uh, I can’t stay long,” Zidane sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck and glanced to Marcus and Blank. “I have to pick Sarah up in a little bit.”

“The Princess had a play date?” Marcus tugged on his bandana.

“Not exactly...”

“You’re marrying the princess off, eh?” Blank smiled and towed Zidane forward. “Boss, look who it is!”

“I might be blind in one eye, but my ears work jus’ fine,” He grumbled with a rigid voice from years of smoking cigars. Slowly, the man lowered his drink, looking over his shoulder at Zidane. His purple hair had dissipated into thin wisps falling from beneath his leather cap. Deep wrinkles etched into his face, accompanied by dark circles from many sleepless nights. Despite always being a big man, Baku had thinned significantly and he hung differently on his own skeleton. ‘The King is here. Who else could it be but King Zidane Tribal?’ Baku held his hand out. “It’s been a while, you fool.”

Zidane grinned and reached out, grabbing Baku’s thick wrist. The two men did a curt shake before the group scraped their chairs up. The bartender was quick to serve tall steins of frothy golden ale. The white airy bubbles dribbled over the edges and the bartender bowed deeply before returning to his

station. Baku sipped his crisp ale and licked his chapped lips.

“Doesn’t that ever get tiring?”

“It lost its charms over a decade ago,” Zidane shrugged, tilting his head back. He realized in that moment he desperately needed a drink. “But there’s nothin’ I can do about it. It’s all embedded in their muscles.”

“So, tell us about the new prince,” Blank grinned widely.

“Shut up, Blank,” Zidane shot him a dead-pan look.

“Hot damn, Sarah’s gettin’ married!” Cinna perked up at the idea. “It’s the Count of Reno’s son, ain’t it? Y’know the *Alexandria Courier* gets it right on the nose sometimes with all their gossip.”

“No,” Zidane shook his head.

“You’re keepin’ the commoner thing goin’, huh?” Marcus teased from behind his stein.

“It’s just a boy she met at her party,” Zidane said blandly, drinking more of his ale. “Let’s not get our panties in a wad. One little date doesn’t mean the next royal wedding is in the summer.”

“I can already hear the bells ringing,” Blank smirked, cusping a hand around his ear.

“For the last time, shut up, Blank.”

“God, you’re so sensitive about anything relating to your girls,” Blank chuckled. “Lighten up. Don’t tell me big bad Zidane is scared of your daughter’s getting *cooties*? ”

“How do I explain it to an airhead?” Zidane shot back.

“Damn, get another round on this table,” Blank said, banging his fist to surface and making the cups jump. “The King needs another drink!”

“I already told you I can’t stay long,” Zidane told him. “I told Sarah I’d be back in two hours.”

“A man of obligations,” Baku said from behind his stein. “Y’know, when you were a kid, you’d do the most asinine things. But you always felt this need to do things for others. You haven’t changed, Zidane.”

“So I’ve heard...” Zidane muttered, his bangs falling across his brow.

Baku glanced around the dank bar. “Where’s your rag-tag team of rust?”

“I came alone.”

“You’re tellin’ me Sir Rust-a-Lot let you leave the castle *unguarded?*” Baku arched his eyebrows. “I guess time can soften even the hardest of shells.”

“Yeah, well, Steiner doesn’t concern himself much with me,” Zidane shook his head. “It’s Beatrix I’m always combating. Steiner would much rather babysit the girl’s.”

Baku let out an airy laugh. “Sounds ’bout right.”

Across the table, Marcus, Cinna, and Blank whispered furiously between each other, glancing over their shoulders. Zidane furrowed his brow and took a long drink of ale, eyeing his brother’s suspiciously. Blank snickered and glanced to Zidane, realizing they were being watched. He hurriedly elbowed Marcus in the arm and the man perked up.

“What’s so funny over there?” Zidane asked.

“Look over my shoulder discreetly,” Blank told him. After a moment of hesitation, Zidane’s bright blue eyes flickered across the room. A slender woman with long poppy flower red hair sat by her lonesome with a slender flute glass sat before her. She had creamy tan skin that gleamed like almond

butter beneath the dim lighting of the bar. Her eyes met Zidane's and quickly, he pulled away.

“What about her?”

“She’s makin’ eyes at you!” Blank leaned forward with a smile.

“Well,” Zidane licked his lip free of foam. “I’m the king. People always stare at me.”

“No, she’s making different eyes at you,” Marcus insisted. Zidane could only shrug.

“Man, what is wrong with you?” Blank furrowed his brow. “You would have been jumpin’ all over that! You wouldn’t even be sitting at this table with us anymore.”

“Yeah, two decades ago you would’ve been right, Blank,” Zidane said with an even voice.

The table was quiet for a moment. Cinna fingered the woodwork on his stein. “You still wear your wedding band.” Zidane glanced to the thin simple band of gold on his left hand. “Even after ten years...?”

“Yeah,” Zidane replied curtly, his eyes trained down. “I’m still married to her, Cinna.” The table floundered into another silence and Zidane almost

felt bad he couldn't be that carefree wild young man he had lost all those years ago. Something inside of him had changed and he couldn't release that side of himself anymore. Zidane was simply too knotted and wrapped up inside his own anxieties and worries as a father and a King.

"Are you happy, though?" Baku asked, surprising the table. Every man looked to the aged one who had just about cleared his second ale. "You don't have to give your entire life to her just because she lost her's, Zidane."

"Yeah, I know... it's not really about that?" Zidane shook his head. "I just..." He pursed his lips and looked between his old family. "No one's really caught my eye."

"How can anybody when you're always holed up in that castle?" Blank shrugged. He signaled to the bartender for another round and was amazed at the speed of service. Having the King as your friend surely had its perks. "It's one of your first night's out in who knows how long. It couldn't hurt to just *talk* to someone, could it?"

"I think dating is a lot different when you're a king," Zidane cracked a small smile at the thought. "Besides, I have the girl's to think about."

Blank pushed Zidane's freshly served ale towards him. "Come on. Have another drink and go talk to her, Zidane. She looks lonely. You could at least invite her to our table."

Zidane looked back at the mysterious red headed woman. She took a delicate sip of her drink, moving gracefully and dainty. In many ways, she looked quite exotic with her narrow waist and wide hips. Despite having dark eyes, they glittered in the candelight. Silky strands of hair tumbled over her shoulder until she became aware of Zidane's staring. She met his eyes and smiled sweetly.

"Oh, what the hell," Zidane muttered under his breath. In the next moment, the sound of his stool was scraping out from beneath him. He grabbed his stein of liquid courage and walked away from the table. Blank, Marcus, and Cinna snickered between each other. Baku couldn't help but roll his eyes. Zidane could see the woman blush as he approached and he suddenly felt very bashful. Zidane swallowed roughly, cursing the ale already coursing in his veins. "Hello," He managed to say.

"Your Majesty," She nodded her head politely. "You must have seen me staring. It was quite

unpolite of me. I was just... surprised to see you here of all places in Alexandria.”

“My friend owns the theatre,” Zidane said lamely, gesturing towards the stage. “I, uh, I noticed you sitting alone over here. Did you... want some company?” He rubbed the nape of his neck.

“I’d like for you to sit with me, yes,” The woman told him with a harmonious voice. She folded her hands into her lap. ‘What a treat it would be to borrow your ear for the night, Your Majesty.’ Zidane glanced over his shoulder before he seated himself across from her. Twenty years ago, Zidane would have been doing just this with a different girl every night. But now the entire idea was foreign to him and he worried he didn’t have the slightest clue as to what he was doing. “I’m new to Alexandria.”

“Oh, where from?” Zidane arched his eyebrows.

“Some place far away,” She turned her head coyly, batting her eyelashes at him. “You probably have never heard of it.”

“Try me,” Zidane grinned. “I’ve been corner to corner of Gaia.”

“I’ve heard the tales of you,” The girl grinned. The light fell across her face and her skin glowed.

Zidane couldn't help but think how beautiful and alluring she was. "You're one of the Eight Heroes who restored peace and balance to Gaia. Your tales stretch must further than just the corners of the world, Your Majesty."

Zidane stared at the mesmerizing woman for a beat. "What's your name?"

She smiled, sitting up straight now and reaching for her bubbly drink. "You can call me Fauna."

The orange glow of the evening was beginning to set in. Sarah overlooked the narrow alley through the small window of the workshop that belonged to Dante. It seemed he was the only one who worked in the back forgery, making heavier and more industrial things than what his parent's store fronted. Sarah ran her hand along the sil before turning and gazing across the room. Dante had his back to her. He was crouched on a stool, his arms working back and forth.

"Is it almost done?" Sarah asked, her heels clicking against the dusty floors.

“Just about,” Dante paused, grinning over his shoulder. It made Sarah’s heart leap. ‘Don’t be too impatient with me.’ Sarah smiled, almost embarrassed and Dante returned to his work. Sarah took that time to walk around. The warmth of the furnaces licked up and down her arms. She admired heavy tools that had chips and dings in them. It was amazing to Sarah how talented people were to use these oddly shaped tools to make useful things and objects of artisan value. “Alright. It’s finished,” Dante wiped some sweat from his brow and grabbed his work, carrying it to a table and thunking it down.

It was a shiny brown leather saddle with strips of blue and yellow cloth hand stitched to the body. Sidepacks of intricate leatherwork were attached, along with hand woven braids of leather for flair. Metal button fastenings lined the edge of Dante’s work. Sarah looked with bright excited eyes, her fingers grazing Dante’s freshly finished piece. “You would mount this on a Chocobo?” Sarah asked, looking up from admiring his details.

Dante nodded. “Ever ridden one?”

“Never.”

“That’s a sin!” Dante grinned crookedly. “I’ll have to take you to a Chocobo Farm one day and

teach you how.”

Sarah gazed across the table on the edge of surprise. Despite his tan skin gleaming with sweat and his hair being disheveled, there was something quite charming about him. Finally, Sarah managed to smile. She could feel her face heating up and cursed herself mentally. “That would be a lot of fun.” She sighed in the next moment, glancing to the window.

“What’s wrong?” Dante asked as he untied his apron and hung it up.

“Oh, nothing,” Sarah shook her head and hugged herself at her elbows. ‘I just know my father will be back soon and... I don’t really want to go home yet.’ She looked to Dante, whose smile had never wavered. “I do hope we get to see each other again, Dante.”

Dante came around the table to stand beside Sarah. He was nearly an entire head taller than her and she felt so safe being in his presence. Tenderly, he set a hand on the small of her back. “Let’s not worry about our deadline so much. Do you want to go on the roof?” He gestured towards a ladder against the far back wall. “We have a really good view of Alexandria.”

Sarah smiled, looking up at him. “Show me, please.”

Dante climbed the rickety ladder first and eased open the hatch at the top. The sunlight tumbled down below onto Sarah and overhead the birds tweeted and welcomed them outside. Dante quickly scrambled up and reached down, offering his hand to Sarah. Their fingers laced together and he hoisted her up as if she weighed nothing at all. Securely, he wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her towards a thick board that had been placed for stability. Together, they carefully sat down, their legs running over the thatched roofing. It was a beautiful evening setting across Alexandria. Not a cloud in the sky. There was promise of a full moon that night. The red roofs of Alexandria were numerous and sprawled out in all directions around Sarah. She couldn’t help but gawk seeing it so close, rather than from a tower in the castle. Sarah’s hands took in the rigid feeling of the tiles below her. She even reached out and touched the chimney, making Dante chuckle. Distantly, looming over the low modest buildings clustered together, stood the Alexandrian Castle. Sarah knew it so well like the back of her hand that, in a way, the castle seemed so small to her. But from where she sat perched on the roof, it

looked so massive, like a true force to be reckoned with. In the center, the tall crystal glinted in the evening light. A fresh breeze washed over the two, sending Sarah's wavy blonde locks around the frame of her face.

Sarah took in a deep breath, tilting her head into the warm sunshine. "Oh, Dante, it's so beautiful! Do you come up here often?"

Dante smiled sheepishly, raking his dark hair from his face. "I eat lunch up here every day."

"Wow, you're so lucky," Sarah smiled, watching the birds overhead.

"A princess calling me lucky. That's new," Dante smirked, wrapping his arms around his knees. The collar of his tunic brushed against his neck in the breeze. "This is a very quiet part of the town. My parents are very happy here."

Sarah looked to him, tucking a lock behind her ear. "Are you happy to be here?"

Dante watched the birds glide away beyond the mountain range that encased the territory of the kingdom. He shrugged after a moment. "I've only ever known Alexandria. My parents think Lindblum

is too loud and noisy to live a happy life. But how can I know if I've never tried it for myself?"

"I feel the same way," Sarah agreed, training her eyes out to the swirling evening horizon with Dante. "My world feels even smaller than yours most days. Did you know today's the first time I've been allowed to leave the catle without a clan of soldiers following my every move?"

"It's nice to hear the Knights of Pluto don't think I'm a threat," Dante smiled sweetly at Sarah and she felt nearly intoxicated by his look in the orange sunset. "Maybe one day you and I can have what we want."

She stared at him for a moment before speaking quietly, her lips barely moving. "What is it that you want?"

"I just want us to be happy."

Sarah smiled meekly beneath his gaze. "I think one day that both of us will be."

"With you as Queen, I think everyone will be," Dante whispered. He paused for a beat before he leaned forward, pressing his warm lips to Sarah's. She had never experienced the touch of someone else's lips to hers. It was exhilarating and her heart

beat rapidly in her chest. Her whole body threatened to shake as she closed her eyes and allowed him to kiss her. His hands came up, gently cradling her head in his palms. The tender way he touched her evoked a feeling from her chest she had never felt before. Could it really have been love? A love similar to what her parents had fostered? Sarah could only hope. It felt so right being in his arms as his hands slowly fell from the frame of her face and enveloped her slender body. He pulled her closer and she melted against him, her hands pressed to his chest. The two young adults kissed whole heartedly, forgetting everything around them. For the first time in her sixteen years of life, Sarah's mind was not trained on being a prim and proper princess. In fact, the entirety of her destiny to the throne and allegiance to the castle had completely dissipated from her mind. The only person she could think of was Dante, with his gleaming skin and crooked boyish smile. The smell of iron wafted away from him and Sarah could only think to pull herself closer, as if they could fuse into one. Sarah realized in that moment how much she missed out on in the life she was born into.

They parted from each other, only staring into their eyes. Sarah's hand tenderly came up and

carressed his cheek. “Princess, I...”

Sarah pressed her finger to his lips and gently shushed him. “I don’t ever want you to call me that. Just hold me, please.” And with that, he pulled her closer and together the two young lovers watched the sky darken, uncaring of the arrival of the king.

One or two ales had turned into four or five. The show was due to start in the next hour, but the lively King, who had tapped into some of his fun energy, had rowdied the entire bar with free rounds of beer. A drunken alley dweller banged on the piano situated by the stage. The bartender did nothing to stop it. Amongst all the rowdy yells and slur words hopping around, Zidane still enjoyed drink after drink with Fauna, whose exotic nature had not alluded her. As the evening in the bar waned on, Dagger began to drift from Zidane’s mind for the first time in ten years. Any ominous feeling that brought him was washed away with each gulp of ale. For the first time in seventeen years, Zidane felt like the weight of being king wasn’t on his shoulders. It was as magical as simply discarding a heavy coat from his frame.

Zidane set his empty stein on the table. “Let me get you another!” Blank grinned. He had joined Fauna and Zidane half an hour ago and was wingmanning too hard, but Zidane was much too drunk to really protest. Zidane shook his head at the offer, though, patting his vest.

“Nah, I’m gonna go out for a smoke,” Zidane said, standing up. That’s when he froze, however, his eyes trained across the bar. “Oh shit—”

“What?” Blank perked up in his stool, gazing to Zidane with glazed eyes. “What’s wrong? If you forgot your smokes that dolt on the piano has got some.”

“Blank, please tell me it’s not really eight-thirty,” Zidane shook his head. “*Please* tell me the clock is wound wrong.”

“Uh,” Blank glanced towards the narrow windows situated towards the low ceilings. They only captured the sight of people’s feet shuffling by, but they were dark now with a sheen of candelight reaching across the panes. “I think it is eight-thirty.”

“I was supposed to pick Sarah up an hour and a half ago!” Zidane immediately pushed his chair out of the way. “I’ve got to go!”

“Whoa, whoa,” Blank staggered to his feet and caught Zidane’s arm. “So you’re just gonna barge outta here? Before the show even starts? What about Fauna?”

The crash of piano keys made Zidane flinch and his bloodshot eyes darted away from Blank for the slightest moment. “What about Fauna? This is about Sarah.”

“She’s sixteen, she can take care of herself.”

“Blank, Beatrix will have my head if she has to find her way home alone because I *ditched* her to drink in some dingy bar!” Zidane shook his head. “I really gotta go.”

“I thought it was your day off,” Blank protested and Zidane sighed in exasperation. “Come on, we’re havin’ a good ol’ time. I miss these days. I miss *you*, Zidane. And besides, if you stick around a little bit longer with Fauna, I think your lucky stars will align.”

The weight of Zidane’s world was coming back in on him. Being a father and a king rushed past him. His familiar schedule became very familiar to him. It would be dinner time soon and Beatrix would freak out if Zidane and Sarah hadn’t come

back. Zidane hiccuped and blinked his dry eyes, glancing towards Fauna who seemed disappointed he was leaving.

“Look, I appreciate it,” Zidane said quietly beneath the atmosphere of the bar. “But I *really* have to go, Blank. There are more important things right now.”

Blank looked utterly displeased and shuffled his boots, shaking his head. Zidane pat him on the shoulders before saying bye to the rest of Tantalus. He slipped out from the door, his boots beating against the steep stairs that brought him back into the alleyway. Zidane hadn’t realized how hot the little pub and theatre had grown. The pleasant night time breeze overtook him. The stars were out and the moon was just beginning to rise from the mountain range. Sarah had overstayed. Zidane slipped a cigarette from his vest pocket, heading in the direction of the modest shoes store not too far away. Zidane’s brain was swirling in his own head. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been so intoxicated. He inhaled his cigarette deeply as he began up the alleyway.

“Your Majesty!” Came a sing-song voice and he stopped, trying not to sigh. Slowly, he turned,

tapping some ash off the end of his cigarette. Fauna approached him with rosy cheeks. “You must leave so soon?”

“Yeah,” Zidane nodded, lowering his cigarette from his lips. “Duty calls.”

“Tonight was wonderful, thank you,” She half-bowed towards him, her silky red hair falling over her shoulder. “It’s not very often a girl like myself is noticed by a King and Hero of your caliber. You made tonight very special for me. I... I do hope I can see you again, Your Majesty.”

For the first time in three hours, Zidane thought of Dagger. And in his drunkeness, he was blown away by the unimaginable feelings of pining and lust he had for her. Ten years had been far too long and the weight was crushing in the moment. He blinked rapidly beneath the pale milky moonlight, looking to the composed and bashful Fauna that no where near resembled the woman he had once loved.

Zidane nodded towards Fauna, his blond locks bouncing. “Maybe we’ll meet again, Fauna.”

“May I... kiss you goodnight, Your Majesty?” She asked timidly.

Zidane watched his hazy ribbon of smoke peel away from his cigarette before sighing. “I’m sorry. I’m in love with someone else.” In his drunken stupor, sheepishly Zidane shuffled off, leaving the exotic girl from the bar all alone in the alleyway.

Bella had taken a long and winding walk that took her to the far perimeter of the castle’s grounds. She took the time to admire velvety flower petals and smell the sweet honeysuckles that blossomed just before it got cold. She felt free as she walked. Though Bella knew her studies were important, she couldn’t help but give in to the desire to live her life as freely as possible. The anxiety of the next step in her studies was both frightening and enticing. Maybe Eiko was right. Maybe she would hold her own power for the good of the people one day, just as Sarah was destined to lead Alexandria with continued dignity. But the thought of time waning on was as daunting to the princess as it was her own father.

After Bella had finished her walk, she simply decided not to return to Eiko in the library. Instead, she returned to the sitting chambers that connected the Princesses rooms and sunk down on the couch to

read. She chose Lord Avon for comfort as she cuddled between the mountain of throw pillows, watching the sun sink behind the mountains. It wasn't long until Alex wandered back and her eyes lit up at the presence of a sister. Alex asked all kinds of questions about Bella's studies and her day, but the middle child was sly and easily deflected them all.

"Where's Daddy and Sarah?" Bella asked, folding her legs beneath her on the couch cushions. "It's almost dinner time."

"Everyone's been actin' strange all day!" Alex exploded, throwing her hands out at her side. "Daddy and Sarah have been gone *all day!* Beatrix won't stop chopping up mannequins in the training room and calling Daddy 'stupid' *and* there is no cooking happening in the kitchen—I was just there for a snack!"

"Hm," Bella arched her eyebrows, glancing towards the darkening windows. Her stomach ached at the thought. She had only had a thin slice of cheese on toast that morning for breakfast, hurriedly, between her lectures. Bella was nearly desperate enough to eat that liver pudding Chef Quina insisted upon. "That is very strange, Alex."

The chamber door suddenly flew open and Alex shrieked with surprise. Eiko stood in the door way with large concerned eyes. But they quickly grew agitated when she lay eyes on Bella. “There you are! I’ve been looking for you for *hours!* You never came back. Explain yourself.”

“I had a headache,” Bella folded her book shut. “You said I shouldn’t summon in a foul mood. So I sought to fix that.”

Eiko’s lips drew into a thin line, but her thoughts were interrupted by Alex. “Wow! You’re gonna summon something? Can I watch?”

Eiko straightened her shoulders and looked out the window, spying the very beginning crest of the large and full moon. “Since your father seems to be absent... yes, Alexandra. You may accompany us. Arabella, it’s time. Let us go.”

Bella walked towards the window and pressed her hand to the cool pane. Down below, a nestled Alexandria glittered like fireflies. Somewhere out in that town, Sarah and Zidane were present. Bella’s stomach tossed in turmoil at the thought of her father not being there for her first summon. But perhaps, she thought, if she did well, Zidane would

see if from wherever he was and know not to be afraid of her any longer.

11. A Taste of Chaos

Chapter Eleven

It was a chilly and damp night in Alexandria. The streets were quiet and empty, lonesome candles flickering within dewey glass encasings. The cobblestone paths gleamed beneath the bright moon. A delicate woman's laugh rang out from the darkness of a narrow alleyway and moments later, Sarah staggered beneath a leemony pool of light, her fingers laced with Dante, who laughed and stumbled after her. Once it became apparent Zidane had gotten held up elsewhere, Dante took it upon himself to deliver the princess back to the castle. They had taken the long way, however. Sarah leaned against the chilly iron base of the light pole, laughing with Dante, her breath puffing before her in the still night. They felt themselves to be so sneaky, taking the back ways and stealing kisses in the darkness. Dante admired the grinning princess, with her damp hair pressed to her head. She wore his coat that was much too big, swallowing her slender figure.

Sarah's giggles fell away and around them, the cicadas chirped warmly. Dante glanced up and down

the alley, but the weather had people flocking in doors towards their furnaces. Overhead, the candlelight enticed moths that fluttered just inches above Sarah's head. Dante grinned and stepped forward in the ring of light, dipping down and claiming her lips. Sarah felt that this was how life was meant to be as a regular person. Doing whatever you'd like at whenever time you choose. Stealing kisses with the person you fancy beneath the wet night time sky— simply being outside of the confining castle walls— it was all so liberating for Sarah. She couldn't think of a thing differently. Dante's lips parted from hers and he looked up at the sky.

“I bet if we go to the river by the castle, we’ll be able to see all the stars,” He whispered.

“But the guards—”

“There’s a different way,” Dante grinned. “A path the guards won’t see you on.”

Sarah stood up straight with a smouldering smile. “Do you always take the paths less traveled?”

Dante’s laugh filled the empty alleyway. “When I’m tryin’ to have fun, yes.” And with that, he grabbed Sarah’s hand, leading her across a small

plaza before they disappeared down another alleyway.

Zidane was cursing himself when he finally made it back to the store. It was well near nine o'clock. He was still rather tipsy but aware he reeked of alcohol and cigarette smoke. He was already calling himself a chump. What kind of king dumps their daughter off at a shop and fails to pick her up on time? Zidane knocked on the small chestnut wood door to the right of the store's large picture windows. A figure illuminated by a candle appeared, gently easing the door open.

"Your Majesty," Lucen opened the door fully now, grimacing at the mucky weather.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," Zidane said sheepishly. No matter how he planted his feet, he still felt like he was tilting. "I... I didn't mean to lose track of time."

"It's quite alright, Your Majesty," Lucen nodded modestly, holding his fleece cardigan closed. "She was quite a sweetheart. We fed her some beef and potato stew. But actually, Dante decided to take her

back to the castle not too long ago. You just missed 'em."

"Oh, damn," Zidane shook his head, glancing up the dark twisty alleyway.

"My apologies, Your Majesty..."

"No, no," Zidane told him, slowly backing away from the door. "It's my fault, really. How about I invite you, Dinora, and Dante to dinner at the castle tomorrow night? It is my thanks in return for taking care of the Princess."

"The Alexandrian Castle, really?" Lucen arched his bushy eyebrows and Zidane nodded. "I humbly accept, Your Majesty. The honor is all mine."

"Great, thank you. And good night," Zidane waved, turning and hurriedly rushing up the alley. The wind was beginning to pick up and it was brazenly cold. It ran along Zidane's flushed cheek bones like razor blades. Zidane had to return to the castle with Sarah by his side. If not, he knew he was in for a night of chastisings and exaggerated what-if scenarios. What was Sarah thinking heading off with Dante after just one afternoon encounter?

Zidane's breathing picked up as he spilled into a well-lit plaza that was empty. Sharp gusts of winds

blasted at Zidane, blowing his hair back from his face. Did Sarah really trust Dante that much? Is that how quickly Dagger had trusted him? Zidane looked up towards the castle looming over the blocks of small modest townhomes. He pursed his lips before continuing at a jog to catch up with Sarah.

Alex stood at the railing of the highest balcony in Alexandria. It had grown magically before her eyes. It was like the books Alex had read had seemingly become true fabrications in life. From the railing, Alex could see all of Alexandria, out towards the distance, and beyond. The bushy tops of the Evil Forest. The jagged mountains dividing the territories. Even distantly, the ever growing and rumbling Treno could be seen glowing between caverns. Alex hugged her jacket close as the wind whipped around them. She turned to see Bella being poised by Eiko in the center of the decadently designed stone balcony.

Gingerly, Eiko snapped the pearls of Bella's woolen coat together, looking at her nervous dark eyes. "Remember, deep breaths. Calm and collected." Eiko reached up and fluffed Bella's lacy collar. 'You are in control. Nobody else is.' Eiko

pressed something cold and rigid into Bella's hand. "No matter what, you don't lose control. Do you understand?"

Bella's dark hair whipped across the frame of her face as she lowered her eyes to the glinting Periodot in her palm. "Yes," Bella looked to Eiko. "I understand."

"Then you are ready," Slowly, Eiko walked away, wrapping her arm around the chilly Alex.

In the center of the balcony, everything seemed so far away. Bella had never quite realized how large and elaborate the balcony really was. The dark looming distance was taunting. It was like looking out over nothing. Bella looked to the gem in her palm before slowing holding it out in front of her. She closed her eyes, directing her attention to the growing energy in the pit of her stomach. But something peculiar happened. A soft gentle voice began to sing as Bella reached deep within her. It was a voice so familiar, singing that song she somehow knew. When Bella opened her eyes, a light had encased her. All around the balcony, the wind ceased. It only whished around Bella, who watched in astonishment at the swirling green lights surrounding her.

In the blink of an eye, the light swirled around Bella before bolting towards the railing. The light fused together and Bella had to cringe away from the brightness. Slowly, she lowered her hand, looking out into the dark sky. There he was. Ramuh. He had come to her in his formal robes. His staff was long and jagged with pointy corners. His beard sprawled down from his chin. Bella stood in utter silence as she gazed up at him. The pictures in the textbooks did no justice for Ramuh. He was, in a way, terrifying. But Bella had to swallow that fear and summon courage.

“Speak your name, child,” Ramuh’s voice was deep and husky. He held his bony hand out towards her. “You wish to summon me?”

Bella stepped forward cautiously. “My name is Arabella Alexandros-Tribal,” She told him. “You once served my mother.”

“You must know the story of Joseph, then,” Ramuh tilted his head back.

Eiko gripped Alex with excitement, smiling ear to ear. Bella had performed beautifully. Though she was shy by nature, bashful, turned inwards, Eiko could see how well she was holding together. The energy and focus it took to even summon the

Eidolon was tiresome. Bella was well gifted as a summoner. Eiko could tell she would be a very strong force in nature. But something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Eiko looked towards the crystal at the edge of the balcony. It was electrified again. Eiko's grip on Alex loosened and she took a few steps that direction. The bolts pulsated, swirling around and around. In a way, it mesmerized Eiko, who could only stare into it like she knew it too well. And that's when a rumble of thunder rang out and Eiko's head snapped towards the sky. Darkening clouds had gathered and travelled much too fast. A sudden gust broke out again, howling fiercely.

“Dammit!” Eiko yelled, curling her fists together. “Bella, seal Ramuh now! Seal him!”

Bella turned to look at the summon, holding the Periodot up and searching deep to her core. But something was wrong. Bella turned the stone in her hand. It was much murkier in color now. “It’s not doing anything!” Bella shouted. Cold sheets of rain came down now. Alex let out a shrill cry, holding her hands over her head. Eiko looked past Bella at Ramuh. A bolt of lightening struck in the distance and he was gone.

“It’s too late,” She whispered to herself, her voice carrying away in the wind. Someone had been watching. There was still a presence, a state of mind, and an atmosphere to this type of gain. The crystal sizzled and Eiko gasped sharply. “Bella, move!” Eiko darted forward as a bolt of lightening chased her. It zapped towards the gem in Bella’s hand, burning her palm. Bella fell backwards on the ground, scrambling away. Alex’s boots pounded to the wet brick, grabbing Bella’s arm.

“Are you alright?!”

Bella glanced towards her bloody hand. “Eiko... what’s happened?!”

Furious bolts of lightening struck Gaia’s surface now, all the way towards the cresting horizon. Bella and Alex stood beside Eiko, watching as smoke arose. Bella’s insides knotted in utter turmoil. Eiko’s face was stone hard. The rain ceased and the three princesses stood with hair flattened to their head, stiff in their woolen coats. The crystal sizzled out and the lightening stopped. A cold breeze returned, along with the smell of smoke, and the sounds of shouts.

“It seems there’s still a market for the taking of Eidolons,” Eiko said. “Someone wants your power,

Arabella. Just like they wanted your mother's so long ago.”

“And... I just gave them Ramuh?” Bella’s voice cracked. Her blood stained the stone railing. “Daddy and Sarah are down there! There’s fire and probably chaos—” Tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

“Now is not the time to get muddled down in your feelings,” Eiko looked to her, a strand of purple hair stuck to her cheek. “Go to the infirmary. Tomorrow, we begin reparations.”

Bella glared towards Eiko through her bleary sight before she turned promptly, descending the stairs. A trail of blood uncaringly followed her. Eiko stared after where she went for a moment before looking over the now hazy Alexandria.

“Your father and Sarah are fine,” Eiko said, calmly.

“Why did you let Bella do that when you knew this could happen?” Alex asked after a beat, lifting her dark eyes to Eiko. The young girl was quite bright and in tune, despite living with her head up in the clouds and buried in vibrant cards. “She’s just going to blame herself for it.”

“And your father will blame me,” Eiko replied.
“It’s part of life as a summoner, Alexandra.”

Zidane peeled himself away from the wall he had scrambled against as the sharp bolts of lightening came down. His heart beat horrendously as people came out onto the streets, murmuring and looking towards the ominous cloudy sky with perplexed looks. Many people shouted and began hauling buckets towards buildings in a haze. Hurriedly, Zidane grabbed one from the closed down flower stand and used a spigot to fill it full. He hurried towards a burning cottage just as a woman with two young girls beneath her arms burst from the flames.

“Go to the plaza,” Zidane told her. “There’s nothing on fire that way!”

Zidane looked up towards the hazy sky, looking through the vaneer to spy the castle. It was Ramuh, Zidane knew it. The eccentric blue bolts that had come down were ones he was familiar with. Zidane felt his entire body stiffen as he listened to the commotion of the villagers knowing Eiko was to blame for this. Whatever had happened, Zidane could only be glad it wasn’t worse. But it was

everything Zidane had warned her against only a week ago. Zidane had a few choice words to say to Eiko. But his attention shifted away when the villagers began worrying about the embers floating to neighboring rooftops. With his teeth ground together, Zidane continued to fill his bucket over and over again. Eiko would face up to this mistake, he would see to it.

Dante's eyes were trained on the blazing orange flames beginning to reach up from the cluster of houses. Sarah was looking at the castle across the river, her head tilted back, and her mouth left to hang open. Dante slowly gazed over the fire, listening to all the noise rise up, riling the Alexandrian's from their sleep. He turned to the stunned Sarah, his dark eyes bewildered.

“What the hell was that?”

Sarah shook her head, finally tearing her eyes away from a tall peak. “I don’t know. But it looks like it came from the castle. Dante, I have to get back.” She took a step towards the embankment.

“It’s too deep for you to swim,” Dante glanced towards the path behind them, which was barreling

full of hazy gray smoke. “And the gondola doesn’t come this far. We have to go back this way.”

Sarah’s shoulders rose and fell at the terrible idea that something bad had happened at the castle. She looked to Dante with glossy eyes, unsure of what to do. She needed to see Bella and Alex immediately. And her body still urged her to leap into the river.

Dante grabbed her hand. “Sarah, it’s alright. Just stick with me. I’ll get you back.” He began to tow her away. She was almost unwilling to lose sight of the castle. But together, Dante and Sarah faced the thickening smoke, racing through it despite the dryness building up in the back of their throats. Sarah’s heart thundered in her chest as she followed Dante, a cough threatening to erupt from her mouth. She did her best to wave the smoke away, but it kept attacking all her senses. Her eyes burned and watered, masking her tears of anguish. Alexandria was on fire.

As they bounded back down the path, they began to enter the commotion of townspeople. They were hurling bucket after bucket of water in hurried flustered motions, trying to save their homes. A bucket doused over Sarah as she ran beneath and she gasped sharply at how cold it was. Dante reached

behind him, however, and grabbed hold of her hand, thrusting her through the chaos. They spilled into a plaza blanketed with smoke and Sarah let out a wheeze, hugging her wet clothes close. Sarah tilted her back to watch the sky. Plumes of smoke barrelled away, drifting far above the highest point of the Alexandrian Castle. Internally, it was Sarah's own Plight of Alexandria.

Suddenly, warm arms encased her from behind, spinning her towards them. She already felt so sick and dizzy. But her eyes rest on her father, who looked endlessly happy to see her alright. Zidane hugged her sopping wet body close. He looked over Sarah's shoulder to Dante. "Thank you. You should probably make sure your parents are alright."

"That's a good idea," Dante nodded, lowering his eyes to the shaking Sarah. Briskly, he held eye contact with Zidane before slowly deciding to take an alleyway with no smoke.

"Hey!" Zidane shouted, making the young man pause.

"Tell your parents dinner's still on."

Dante furrowed his brow before he left without another word. Sarah stared after where he had gone

feeling so utterly confused and heart stricken. Zidane pushed some wet hair from her face, however, and filled her vision.

“We have to get back to the castle now, Sarah,” Zidane told her, immediately grabbing hold of her arm and directing her up town. “I have to get reinforcements formally on their way. And you could get sick being out here in the cold all wet like this.”

Sarah let out a short ragged cough as they waded through the smoke. But they eventually emerged back into the shopping plaza that was seemingly empty, vacant of life. Sarah’s bloodshot eyes darted between the few people who lingered, watching in utter astonishment at the scene unfurling overhead. Sarah panted, looking up at her father whose only clear mission was returning home.

“Daddy,” Sarah breathed heavily, having to jog to keep up with his pace. ‘Daddy, what happened? What’s going on?’ Zidane was quiet as he continued forward, easing the iron wrought gate open to ascend to the river’s platform. Sarah yanked her arm away from him, however, taking a few steps back. “I saw it, Daddy,” Sarah said, nearly through clenched teeth. Her cosmetics had smeared along her

cheekbones, her rouge on her chin. Her hair was straight and flat down her neck and her clothes hung heavily on her frame. “It came from the castle. Did Bella do this?”

Zidane pursed his lips, gripping the cold iron in his hand tightly. “Your sister didn’t do this. Eiko will be the one to answer for it.”

Sarah’s blue eyes stared at him long and hard. Finally, she briskly walked past him, appearing on the side of the river. Hurriedly, the soldiers began hooting and hollering and the driver of the boat paddled furiously with his stick to get them across. Already, maids were pouring out from the castle with woolen blankets, enveloping the princess the moment she stepped off the boat. Zidane denied the blankets as he placed his foot to the cracked stone of the pier.

“There you are!” Beatrix appeared from behind the hedges with several soldiers in tow. “I’m sending reinforcements. You’re needed inside the castle.”

“Where is everyone?” Zidane asked tensely, approaching Beatrix. He knew she could smell the beer, but she was nice enough in the moment to not mention anything.

“Bella’s in the infirmary,” Beatrix told him.
“Now go.”

Zidane ran the nearly four flights of stairs to the infirmary without stopping. Whatever intoxication he had been feeling an hour ago was surely worn off. He burst through the doors, his eyes wide, and his breathing ragged. When he came through, the spacious room was quiet. A few soldiers complaining of aches and pains occupied beds. But directly in front of him, Bella sat on the edge of a bed while Doctor Tot examined her hand. Alex was standing at the end of the bed. When she spotted her father, she raced to him with her arms open. Zidane lifted her up, holding her off the ground. He gripped at her tangled wet curls, breathing a sigh of relief. He continued to hold her as he came to Bella’s bedside.

“Your Majesty,” Doctor Tot breathed a sigh of relief. ‘We are most glad to see you. The Princess is quite alright. Nothing some rest won’t fix.’ Tenderly, he held Bella’s hand out towards Zidane. A neat roat of stitches reached across her palm. It was swollen into nasty shades of purple and blue. “She was,

unfortunately, struck by a bolt of lightening. But the damage is not permanent.”

Zidane knelt down, looking to Bella’s wet, nearly ashamed, eyes. He reached out, gently caressing her cheek. “Are you alright? Do you feel fine?” Meekly, she nodded. Her throat was pinched shut. She was certain if she opened her mouth, sobs would escape. Tenderly, Zidane brought her forward, wrapping his arms around her. The moment he did, Bella couldn’t help but burst into tears, pressing her face into his shoulder. Zidane could only rub her back in consolation. He was no good when people cried.

“Everyone in Alexandria is going to fear and hate me!” Bella cried out, leaning back from Zidane now. She rubbed at her sore puffy eyes. Her vision was so blearily, she couldn’t make anyone’s face out. “I don’t want to be a Summoner. It’s stupid and horrible!”

“Hey, don’t say that,” Zidane furrowed his brow, trying to wipe her salty tears away. “Being a summoner is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Like anyone would defend me when approached by a large angry *mob!*” Bella shrieked. “I wish I had never gotten involved with this or even curious! I wish Mother wasn’t a Summoner!” And with that,

she shoved between Alex and Zidane, marching straight out the doors. Zidane's cheeks burned as he watched the door swing shut behind her. He then became acutely aware of all the staring.

"Hey, if you ain't sick or dying, you better get your ass outside and to General Beatrix! Alexandria needs you!"

In a moments notice, the soldiers began scrambling to collect their gear and shuffle out the door. Zidane felt his temper skyrocket, smoke nearly whizzing from his ears. He looked around the now vacant room, his hands curling into fists. He ground his teeth together, his mind trying to figure out what to do next. Doctor Tot, a finely tuned and charismatic character, felt Zidane's tensity.

"Your Majesty, perhaps for now we shall just collect ourselves some dinner and await word from General Beatrix," Doctor Tot came to the seething king's side. "Now is the time to relax and bring the blood pressure down. Things are under control. And anything that happens, you'll be ready for it."

"Where is Eiko?" Zidane asked, keeping his eyes trained on the door. His muscles eagerly awaited the next move.

“She went to the chapel,” Doctor Tot replied, but quickly reached his wing out and grazed Zidane. “Perhaps it’s best you do not confront her tonight, Your Majesty. All of our nerves are shot. We’re all processing many different things at the moment. A good night’s sleep should do you well first.”

“Doctor,” Zidane opened the door, looking over his shoulder. “I mean this with respect. But right now, I really need you to shut the hell up.” And with that, he slammed the door behind him, making the Doctor and Alex flinch.

Zidane bounded up the stairs not quite sure what his plan was. Anger was washing over him like an ocean. And he could see no end to the depths. Everything about his family life was perfectly normal just three weeks ago. The family lived healthily together, learning to cope in their best ways with the loss of Dagger. Now Zidane only blamed Eiko for this absurdity. Bella was absolutely distraught. It was the same self-hate that had plagued Dagger for years and it made Zidane’s heart shatter into a million pieces to see again. The very thing he vowed to never let happen again had. There

were consequences to be had. And Zidane felt certain he wasn't on the receiving end of them.

Zidane charged right by Steiner who had an onslaught of questions to ask him. He had been tending to the horribly chilly and downright distraught Sarah when an inconsolable Bella had raced through the chambers. It was Princess Pandemonium that night. When he saw an angry Zidane, however, he cleared the path and pressed himself up against the wall. In a way, his rigid body language and dark eyes answered a lot of Steiner's questions. Something terrible had happened that stretched far beyond young girl's emotions.

Zidane threw the intricately carved chapel door open. It was loud and obtrusive, echoing through the tall vaulted ceiling. The room was empty. Empty piers lined up, facing the front of the room with an intricate marble statue had been carved to reflect a hand grasping a crystal. Candles flickered on every surface, casting eerie shadows up the walls. It was so dark outside and hazy that no milky rays of the moon spilled through the skylights. Just straight ahead down the aisle was Eiko, who was on her knees with her head bowed in front of the marble statue. Zidane quiet as he controlled his breathing,

staring at the back of Eiko so hard, he was sure he'd burn a hole through her.

Slowly, Eiko lifted her head and gazed at the statue in front of her. "I knew you'd come, Zidane. There's been a disturbance. Things are not right. The spiritual world is mal-aligned."

Zidane took a few curt steps down the aisle on the thick running carpet. "Eiko, what have you done? Things aren't right because you made them that way." Eiko came to her feet and turned towards Zidane, folding her hands in front of herself. "You have damaged Bella deep, Eiko. Deeper than any of those stitches run. You put *my* daughter in harms way. She wasn't ready to cast that summon. Her studies only just began."

Eiko came down the aisle now, her thick purple plait beating against her back. "Arabella did not hurt herself. She is a fine Summoner."

"Then what the hell happened?!" Zidane flung his arms out at his side. "Ramuh doesn't just cast deadly lightening bolts on towns for no reason, Eiko!"

Eiko curled her hands into fist. Zidane was ready for her to take a swing at him. But her face grew

pinched and she let out a tense sigh. “Someone took it from Bella.”

Zidane was quiet, staring at her with bewidlered glazed eyes. “No... Eiko, no—”

“Just like when Kuja took Bahumaut from Brahne, yes,” Eiko nodded. “She was struck by the same bolt that sent Dagger hurdling off that balcony.”

Zidane paced a few steps away from Eiko, tensely running his hand along his prickly locked up jaw. Slowly, he raked his hair from his face and looked over his shoulder at the pained Eiko. “Did you know this could happen?” The Princess of Lindblum was quiet, only staring at him. Zidane came closer to her. “Please, Eiko, tell me you did *not* think this could happen again? What did we fight for all those years ago? How could we carelessly let the evil we vanquished come back and live amongst us — probably has our own subjects! Eiko, *please*.”

She tilted her head up to look at him, her eyes glossy in the candelight. “I may have felt a quake or two in the spiritual world but I... I didn’t think it was anything as powerful as Kuja or Garland could once be.” Zidane closed his eyes and turned away from her again. ‘Zidane, I’m sorry,’ Eiko grabbed

his arm. “But Bella is strong. She is much more controlled and tame than Dagger was. If anybody can stop this, it’s her.”

Zidane yanked his arm from her touch. “You really think I’m going to send my thirteen year old daughter to finish the war *I* couldn’t?” Zidane shook his head. “If it’s anyone on Kuja or Garland’s caliber, they know who Bella is now. They’ve been waiting all this time...” Zidane began for the door but paused. Beneath the bright candlelight, his hair nearly glowed gold. “I’d send for your Pops. Alexandria’s gonna need money for reparations. Good night.”

12. Fragmented

Chapter Twelve

The tweeting birds roused Bella from her slumber. Her eyelashes fluttered as she tilted her head on her silk pillows, glancing towards the curtains that hadn't been closed all the way. Slivers of sunlight reached through to her and she could see a blue sky with puffy white clouds. Bella sat up on her elbow, gazing towards the beautiful day outside like she couldn't believe it was really there. Her dreams had been fraught with eternally dark skies that lit up that ghastly electrifying blue. How relieved she was, in a way, to see the world had turned a new leaf that day.

Bella heard shifting in her room and sat up, peering off the side of her bed. That's where she found her two sister's, tangled up with each other beneath quilts on their makeshift pallets. Bella made small whisper noises at them until Alex's head perked up. Immediately, the young princess was delighted to see Bella's fresh face. Her tail waved back and forth with excitement as she gave Sarah a jolt.

“She’s awake, she’s awake!” Alex said. Sarah was quick to come to her knees, smiling sweetly up at her little sister.

“Oh thank the gods,” Sarah pressed a hand to her collarbone. “You had Alex and I quite worried last night.”

“Last night was awful,” Alex shook her head. Sarah wrapped her arm around Alex’s shoulders. “I was worried something bad was going to happen to you, Bella.”

Bella sheepishly set her sore hand into her lap, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Alex. You shouldn’t have been there.” She paused, looking towards the window. “I shouldn’t have either.”

“Bella, none of this is your fault,” Sarah reached forward, tenderly gripping her wrist. “The only question now is... what happens next?”

Bella was quiet as she stood and walked towards the window. Slowly, she yanked the velvet drapes back, bathing the room in the early golden rays. Together, the princesses came to stand at the window, looking over the cluster of Alexandrian homes below. Some were visibly charred. Some alleyways had gaps where buildings had been the

day before, but now lay in ashes. Some light smoke still rose from parts of the city. While the damage wasn't catastrophic, it stuck out at the three young girls, who winced at the sight of their kingdom in disrepair.

"I did this," Bella said grimly, her eyes still trained out the window. "I let this happen to Alexandria."

"But you didn't," Sarah shook her head. "This wasn't you, Bella."

"Maybe Daddy was right..." Her voice had dropped significantly in volume. "Maybe there really is something to be frightened of. Maybe, after all, I was just playing with fire and endangering all of those around me. I never want to summon again. I wish I didn't even know about it."

"It's not your burden to bear," Sarah looked to her with a hard face. "You can't shut out the one piece of Mother you were lucky to inherit."

"How is this lucky?" Bella gestured out the window before turning and stomping towards her bed. She stopped with her back to her sisters, her arms crossed over her chest. "You never saw the look in Daddy's face."

“But I did. Last night,” Sarah stepped forward, her silky nightgown flowing back and forth around her slender legs. “Bella, I was down there when everything happened. I saw the bolts and the fire. I saw the people scrambling to minimize the damage. And I *saw* Daddy. He wasn’t frightened, Bella.”

“I can’t explain it, Sarah,” Bella shook her head. “You and I didn’t see the same look.”

“This is my fault,” Sarah looked back to the window. ‘If I hadn’t persuaded Daddy to leave with me, none of this wouldn’t have happened. Daddy never would have let you be in danger like that, Bella.’ She crossed to her sister, placing a firm hand to her shoulder. “I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“Sure I am,” Bella shrugged. “But is everything else?”

When Zidane finally came to in bed, he was greeted with a horrendous headache. His skull pulsated against his brain as he sat up in bed, rubbing furiously at his face. The quilts were tangled around his legs as he stretched, yawning widely. His crusty eyes gazed towards the windows that allowed the fresh daylight to come through. As the world

returned back to his mind, so did his heartache from last night and his anger, as well. There would be a lot to do that day. But more than ever, Zidane just wanted to spend the day with his girls.

He turned his head around the room and that's when he realized Eiko was sitting at his small tea table, a mug of steaming coffee in her hands. She looked to him with sharp bright eyes. Eiko's face had been refreshed with a bath, her cosmetics meticulously reapplied. Her hair was allowed free that morning and it tumbled like soft silk down her back. Zidane sighed, raking his messy hair from his face. Already the morning was not off to a pleasant start.

"Why are you in here?" Zidane asked, coming to the edge of his bed. He reached for his pants and staggered into them, making sure to throw a glare at Eiko for his apparent indecency. "It's not even seven in the damn morning and you're already in my room."

Eiko seemed as equally tense as Zidane as she set her mug on the table and watched him finger his hair into a somewhat acceptable fashion. He then reached for his button up, covering his bare chest quickly. "I expected a King of your caliber to rise earlier for his

kingdom,” She said curtly. “But what can I expect of a hungover King?”

“Did you come here to say something to me? Or make an ass of me?” Zidane asked. He seated himself across from her with a face of stone.

Eiko sighed and sipped her coffee. How dearly she wanted to insult the quality of it, but she held her petty tongue. “I came here to apologize. And to make plans.”

Zidane’s head throbbed again and he reached for the kettle of coffee. His dark tired eyes glanced to Eiko as he filled his mug. He opted to keep it black and drank it slowly, licking his lips. “Plans about what?” His voice was scratchy. “I have a lot to do today.”

“I know,” Eiko replied. “And I’m going to help you with all of that. But now is the time to begin formulating what we will do with our new information.”

Zidane sighed before taking a drink of coffee. Despite having grown up as a fiery and carefree girl, Eiko today meant nothing but business. Zidane didn’t even want to think about last night. Zidane fidgeted with the handle of his mug and looked to

the poised and seemingly well-rested Eiko. “Tell me about this tremor you felt in the spiritual world.”

“It happened a few times when I was praying,” Eiko said. “It started after Sarah’s birthday gala.”

Zidane felt like his insides blanched and that always present feeling of a knot in his stomach jolted forward. He stared long and hard at Eiko. “I’ve been feelin’ something like that since then, too. Even Steiner.” Zidane sat forward. “After you allowed Bella to summon the balcony.”

Eiko drank her coffee slowly and straightened her narrow shoulders. “It caused a disturbance.”

“And you insisted on going forward with her studies?” Zidane arched his eyebrows, almost betrayed. ‘Eiko, why wouldn’t you talk to one of us — any of us— about this? Everything we worked so hard to disarm and beat back— it’s... it can always come back and *our* choices determine that.’ Zidane pressed his hands to his chest. “We are the key to all the destruction, Eiko. In a way, we fought the havoc we sowed.”

“There will always be war,” Eiko told him. “And I thought it was best Bella was an accomplished

Summoner before it came knocking on our doors again. Like it always has in our nightmares.”

Zidane stiffened. “A war of this caliber is *not* what we wanted. Field battles, archers, what have you over your petty grievances!” Zidane threw his arms out at his side. “A war where Eidolons are in play is out of the question, Eiko! They’re weapons of *mass destruction*. Cleyra disappeared before my eyes with just a blink! Alexandria was flattened in an *instant*. We aren’t prepared to do this again, Eiko. We will lose and then Vivi and Dagger’s death... it will all just be in vain.”

“It will not,” Eiko shot back. “We can stop this, Zidane. We still have our friends. And we’re still strong, whether you like to believe that or not.”

“But you *can’t* rely on using *my* daughters!” Zidane’s voice had risen now. “This isn’t the world I want to leave them.”

“You try so hard to cover up the nasty parts of the world,” Eiko sat back in her chair, her blue eyes hard. “You can’t hide these things from them forever, Zidane. They’re older than I was. Sarah is the same age that you were when you were putting your life in the line of danger. They can handle it.”

Zidane was quiet for a moment. Just outside the windows, the birds tweeted pleasantly, but it all fell on deaf ears in the tense royal chambers. “Don’t you want something different for the people of this world?” Zidane finally asked, his voice somewhat hoarse. ‘Do you think I want my daughter’s out there, risking their lives like I did?’ He leaned forward across the table. “Do you really think I have what it takes to *bury* one of them alongside their mother?”

“Whether the princesses join or not is the least of our concerns right now, obviously,” Eiko said, tilting her chin up slightly. The bright rays of sunshine fell across her porcelain cheeks. “It’s important we start making plans and preparations. The other’s should be notified and go to Lindblum at once. You and I will join after reparations are finished here.”

Zidane’s face was stone hard. “You started a War Committee last night, didn’t you? All of these things you’re saying... they’re already being done.”

“Freya departed from Burmecia last night,” Eiko replied. “She is joined by Sir Fratley.”

“What am I going to tell the girl’s?” Zidane shrugged uselessly.

“Simple: the truth.”

Zidane sat in the large empty chambers, perched in his throne with his hands pressed beneath his chin. He stared vacantly forward, awaiting the moment the guards allowed the on-slaught of townspeople with requests and pleas of help in. Steiner and Beatrix stood silently on either side of him. They could tell the King was brooding. Zidane’s anxiety grumbled about in his mind and rustled about in his stomach. His day had been off to an awful start. The girl’s had been silent at breakfast, their heads tilted down. And despite it being a beautiful day outside, Zidane only saw utter doom.

War. The word washed over him like a bitter medicine. How could this be? So soon again? Gaia was still learning to function in the post-world war era. How could something so powerful still be looming? How could it have been so close to them that entire time? Zidane pressed his head to the velvet of his throne, staring emptily at the doors. In a way, he was a fool. Maybe if that last trick of animating the vines of the Iifa Tree had worked, maybe none of this would be happening again. Maybe a world without an Angel of Death was the

true key to peace and tranquility. Whatever it was, Zidane was certain it had nothing to do with his middle child. War changes people in many different ways. Zidane was at an utter loss how to tell his daughter's. They will each cope with it differently and, in many ways, Zidane wasn't ready. He glanced to the band on his finger and pursed his lips.

I need you more than ever, Dagger.

“Zidane...” Beatrix’s voice filled the chamber.
“May we please talk before the counsel begins?”

Zidane sighed and sank down in his throne. “I don’t have much to tell you, Beatrix.”

“But I think you do,” She pressed. “Eiko is packing but Doctor Tot is not. Am I missing something?”

Zidane ground his teeth together and looked between the Captain and the General. He then waved them closer, gazing around the empty room. “Look, I wanted to talk about it after the counsel, but if you want somethin’ to chew on, here: Lindblum is hosting a War Committee activated by Eiko. Someone has Ramuh and they’re probably on the hunt for more.”

Beatrix and Steiner exchanged a look. Beatrix's was stone hard while Steiner's was a mix of unease and discontent. Beatrix let out a sigh that seemed to echo in the grand chamber. "What's our course of action?"

"I want you to accompany me to the Committee," Zidane told her. "I want you on it."

"What about me?" Steiner arched his eyebrows.

Zidane pursed his lips for a moment and hesitated to look towards Steiner. "I want you to stay here with the girl's. If anything happens, Steiner... well, they're yours to keep safe."

Steiner's face looked grim and he tilted his helmet up. "Zidane, surely you're overreacting... it can't be anything like it was before."

Zidane gazed between them at the doors. "I sure hope not, Steiner. But let's just not draw our expectations in the sand quite yet..." Beatrix and Steiner had more prodding to do, but in the next moment, the Knights of Pluto opened the door, arranging a cluster of townsfolk into a neat orderly line, so one by one, they could express their grievances to the king.

Eiko had the windows of her guest chambers open. A fresh breeze blasted through, ruffling the lacy tent that surrounded the bed. Eiko hustled about in barefeet across the tightly woven carpets. She collected her belongings without a second thought, dumping jars of cosmetics and pallets of rouge into her luggage. She yanked velvet and silk dresses from their hangers and unwound scarves and bonnets from the coat rack. As she rummaged through her case, she did her best to make some semblance of order inside, but it was no use. It was as cluttered and disorganized as her entire mind was.

A bird swooped past her open window, catching her attention. Slowly, Eiko approached the window panes, pushing them further out to allow the breeze in. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. And though some parts of Alexandria were charred, it seemed to be a promising and bustling day out amongst the town. Eiko gazed far off into the distance towards the mountain range that divided Lindblum and Alexandria. Her stomach rumbled at the possibilites that awaited them.

She seated herself in the sill, pressing her barefeet to the chilly stone. She watched the sky as her mind wandered away from her. The seventeen years since the last battle felt so incredibly long ago

— but at the same time, it crept over Eiko’s shoulders as if it had only been a few echoing weeks. Of course the months following the war had been awful. No news of Zidane daily. And signs of Vivi slowing down, crawling towards his ultimate stop. In those days, young Eiko remembered vividly wishing to be anywhere in the past. She didn’t even care if she was trapped in the center of the Iifa Tree again; it would mean she would be with Zidane, at least.

Zidane’s return and taking on the throne had been joyous for Eiko. Knowing he still shared the same planet as her meant so much. But she had never shaken that child-like adoration and love for him. Even still today, with as bitter as their relationship could be, no matter how much they actually butted heads; Eiko loved Zidane. And she only wanted what was best for him. Sarah’s birthday gala had been eye opening to Eiko. The tremors that Bella was able to procure in the spiritual world was both intriguing and somewhat terrifying. Eiko saw it as her right as a Summoner, her duty to her people, to investigate this, and Eiko felt she had her answer. Gaia was not at balance anymore. Something had happened and had been taking place, gestating, since the day they vanquished the original evil. And Eiko

could only hope that Zidane would listen to her guidance. She wanted to shake him or slap some sense into him. Eiko wanted to rip him open and find the Zidane she had lost. Dagger may have been buried in the sprawling garden down below, but that same day, they buried Zidane along with her.

“Auntie Eiko?” She was startled from her thoughts, sitting forward on the sill. Eiko gazed towards her open door to see Bella standing there. She was wearing a dark purple dress with a glossy sheen beneath the lighting. Black lace cuffed her neck and elbows, reaching down to mask the nasty scars that covered her hand. Bella looked so small and wiry in the large doorway. Her brown eyes were full of questions as she stared across the room at her mentor. Bella glanced wearily towards the trunk left open at the foot of her poster bed. “You’re leaving?”

“Arabella,” Gracefully, Eiko lowered her long slender legs from the sill and crossed a few steps towards the young princess. “I am needed back in Lindblum.”

“Is this... because of what happened last night?” Bella tilted her head up to look at Eiko. Her luxurious black hair fell around the frame of her face like fine silk. Her eyelashes surrounded her dark

brown orbs that searched only for the truth. Eiko drew her shoulders up as she took in a deep breath. She paced a few steps, her lavender gown trailing after her.

“As your mentor, I’m obliged to tell you the truth,” Eiko told her, reaching out to run her hand along the smooth wood of her bedstand. “I do have to leave because of what happened last night, Arabella. But... it is not because of you.”

“But I *caused* what happened,” Bella held her arms out at her side, distress written across her face. “I don’t want to have a big conference of wise old men coming together and talking about me, Auntie Eiko. I... I have no way to answer for my actions or explain anything.”

“This is not about you, Arabella,” Eiko said with an even voice, calmly looking over the emotional young girl. “This concerns far more than you. This is about war. Power-hungry people in this world are driven to do whatever it takes for them to get the upper hand—even if that means robbing something so powerful, they don’t even know what to do with it. This conference is to prevent that from happening.”

Bella was quiet for a moment, shifting back and forth in her boots. “Can I go with you?”

“Your father would never allow it,” Eiko clucked.

“Do my studies end here?”

“I was told you didn’t want to be a Summoner,” Eiko coyly turned her head. The young girl furiously blushed. Eiko walked towards the writing desk situated beneath a grand oil painting of wide open fields with windmills. She grabbed hold of a dusty red book, extending it out towards Bella. “It’s best you don’t go, Arabella. Stay in Alexandria, be my eyes and ears. In the mean time, you can teach yourself. Read this collection of texts on self-control. I believe it will be beneficial to you.”

Bella turned the book in her hands for a moment before looking back to her teacher. “If there might be another war... is there a chance Alexandria could suffer the same fate?”

Eiko grinned. “We know what we’re doing.”

“But... what if someone gets killed...?”

Eiko’s smile quickly dissipated and she knelt down in front of the teenager. Eiko pressed her hands to her shoulders firmly, giving them a fierce

squeeze. “We’re not going to let that happen, Arabella.”

Zidane straightened his black crisp bowtie in his body-length mirror. His bedroom chambers were doused in pinks and oranges as the sun set. It had been a very draining day, but Zidane had put forth all the approvals for reparations from the fires. He had also managed to help Steiner brainstorm new effective routes for the Knights of Pluto and Squad Beatrix during the King and General’s absence. Zidane had missed lunch, however, and hadn’t seen much of his girls. And now, dinner with the entire family would be somewhat hindered by the fact the Bare’s were coming to share in the feast.

His bedroom door flew open, startling him. He staggered back from his mirror and turned around to see Eiko dressed in travel attire. Her purple hair was secured in a mountain a top her head. She approached Zidane slowly, eyeing his fancy attire.

“I’m guessin’ you’re leaving?” Zidane asked, smoothing his sleeves and checking for lint. “Quite a melodramatic way to make it known. Y’know I was heading downstairs in like five minutes.”

“After your dinner, you’ll be on your way, right?” Eiko arched her eyebrows. Zidane was hesitant to nod. “No dilly-dallying, Zidane. I want you to be the first airship docking at the castle tomorrow morning. We have no time to waste.”

“Yes,” Zidane replied blandly. He returned to the mirror and made sure his buttons were straight. “Give me some time. I have the girls to juggle, too. And I can’t be away long. I’m needed here.”

“We don’t know—”

“Eiko, please,” Zidane turned to her, grabbing hold of her arms. “I don’t want to have this conversation right now. I really need to focus on what’s happening next. And that’s... having dinner with some potential boy for Sarah. That’s already enough for me to wrap my head around. I don’t have the capacity to deal with these other puzzles, okay?”

Eiko look up to Zidane who was bathed in the evening light. She could see he was utterly tired but doing his best to simply muddle through. Eiko pursed her lips. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a thorn in your side, Zidane... I never wanted things to be like this between us. I miss when we could have fun.”

Zidane's grip on Eiko's arms loosened, but he didn't break away from her. "Yeah..." Zidane nodded meekly. "I miss those days, too, Eiko. When everyone was still around..."

Eiko grabbed hold of the edge of Zidane's jacket now. "It's why we can never turn our backs on each other, Zidane. Or forget the other's exist. We all want to help you. We always have. But you never let us. It's our turn now, Zidane, to help you through this. If it means Sarah, Arabella, and Alexandra can have their own safe place to call home. It might be hard to achieve that, but just like before, it's always worth it."

"I know..." Zidane's lips barely moved as his eyes studied her face. Eiko could see his heart strings were taut. He was in pain at the idea of having to do it all over again. The stakes were even higher the second time around. And deep in his eyes, Eiko could see the ever present realization that Dagger wasn't there to face it all with him. Eiko stiffened in his touch.

"We'll get through this," Eiko reached forward, placing her hands on either side of his face. "We always do." And with that, she leaned forward, tenderly pecking Zidane on the cheek. She then

turned and left the King to be alone in his bedroom chambers.

13. The Nightmare's Horizon

Chapter Thirteen

Zidane wasn't feeling well at all. The knot is his stomach had completely unfurled following Eiko's departure and now it only made him queasy. He sat in his room until the very last moment he could. All he did was stare out the window, as if the sky unfurled the unpredictable future ahead of him. Doom washed over him, it was all he could focus on. In the face of all the unanswered questions, Zidane began grappling hard with his existence yet again. He felt himself to be foolish, he thought, as his hands tightened in his legs, gripping his black slacks. He couldn't help but feel he had only been playing make-believe with himself for the past two decades, blindly trying to forget all that happened, unrelenting to the idea it could ever happen again. It always would, he told himself. There was no breaking a cycle he conducted.

Zidane finally emerged from his chambers, doing his best to walk with straight shoulders and a lifted head. But his head hurt terribly and throbbed wholefully on his shoulders. How could he eat

dinner without concern? How could he look at his daughter's knowing he might not be able to protect them from the evils of the world? It seemed as if it was all floating right outside the windows of the castle, like the dense fog that rose from the river every night. And Zidane felt utterly powerless to stop any of it. He thought learning to live without Dagger was the hardest part. Really, it was learning to fight without her. Zidane knew how much everyone worried about him. He wished they didn't. How dearly he wanted to believe they were out of their element, only concerned about the most minute problems. But Zidane knew their worry was genuine. He knew he was different. He *felt* different. But there was nothing he could change about himself now.

When he stepped onto the large platform leading down to the stairs, he saw Sarah awkwardly pacing back and forth while hugging herself. Sarah's hair had been confined to a bun. A few wisps of hair were allowed to fall and frame her face. She wore a one-strap dinner gown that was a mint green with intricate white beadwork in the torso. Her bold statement jewelry glittered in the candlelight. She was nothing short of beautiful and elegant. But her nervous behavior betrayed her. Zidane descended

the stairs, arching his eyebrows at her. When Sarah finally noticed him, she came towards him hurriedly.

“Daddy, I’m so nervous,” Sarah pressed her hands to her stomach. “I think I might vomit. Then he’ll never want to talk to me again.”

“Oh, please,” Zidane grinned, slipping out from beneath his cloak of gloom. He wrapped his arm around Sarah’s shoulders. “You’ll be great. And besides, I think it’ll take a lot more than vomit to drive this boy off.” He directed the two of them towards the next set of stairs.

“I don’t think you realize how important this is,” Sarah said, keeping her eyes trained forward. In front of them, the wall-length windows allowed the abundant clusters of stars to peer through at them. “I really like Dante, Daddy. If this goes well... just imagine—”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Zidane glanced to her. The worry of war had easily been overtaken by the worry of a wedding. He grimaced at the idea of giving one of his girl’s away. “It’s just a dinner, Sarah. Simple enough. You eat dinner every night. I’d say you’re well in practice.”

“Hah-hah, Daddy,” Sarah shot him a deadpanned look. They came to the bottom of the stairs and were greeted by an array of smells wafting through the foyer. Just to the left, through the tall archway, dinner was already being set and primed, awaiting the Bare’s arrival. The smell of juicy pork and pan-seared vegetables made its way towards Sarah and Zidane. Sarah broke from her father’s touch and walked a few paces, tilting her head back to look at the full moon crashing through the circular window above the entrance of the castle. “I wonder if his feelings for me are genuine.”

Zidane was about reply when Alex appeared from the archway with the brightest and bubbly dark eyes ever. “Daddy, look! Supper is extra special tonight!” Her flats clacked against the polished marble as she raced towards him, holding something up in her hand. Upon closer inspection, Zidane realized it was a piece of hard candy.

“Where’d you get that?” Zidane asked, watching as she popped it into her mouth. Her tail happily waved back and forth behind her as she relished in the sugar.

“The maids put it on the table,” Alex said from behind her sweet.

“That’s you’re only one until after we eat,” Zidane told her. Alex looked quite unhappy with the demand. “How many times do I gotta tell you? It’ll rot your teeth out. Do you want to be remembered as the Toothless Princess?”

“... no...” Alex muttered rather reluctantly.

“That’s what I thought,” Zidane replied, patting her on the back. “Let’s go to the dining hall and wait for our guests.” He gingerly touched Sarah’s shoulder blade, peeling the young girl away from the large moon sailing through the sanguid sky. Together, he directed the girl’s into the dining hall where they found Bella standing at the wall-length windows, feeling meek, as she stared at her own reflection in the well-lit window. She looked over her shoulder when she saw the rest of her family come through the archway. What a sigh it was to behold two anxious girls dressed to the hilt. Bella’s long dark blue dress fell over her thin frame heavily. She had been opting for entirely long-sleeve since the accident, in hopes of the fabric swallowing the nasty damage to her right hand.

The help whizzed around the rather dazed royal family as they set the table properly, with the appetizers already awaiting to be gobbled down.

Alex eyed the candy dish tentatively. Zidane looked between all his girls and pursed his lips. “I think we all need to talk before our guests arrive,” Zidane said, making each daughter look to him. “I’ve been so busy and a lot happened yesterday that I think all of us should hash out.”

Slowly, the girl’s migrated towards him. They seemed so small and fragile compared to the fortress of a room that engulfed them. Zidane’s nerves were so pricked as he looked between each of their eyes. He only saw Dagger and the need to protect them intensified. Sarah looked petrified with fear over the impending arrival of Dante. Bella was distraught over her own perceived action. And Alex, well, she looked quite lost.

Bella’s dark eyes studied Zidane’s face before she hugged herself at her elbows. “Are you going to tell us the truth?” Bella asked. “Or are you going to tip toe around it like you always do?” Zidane arched his eyebrows, holding a tense eye contact with his middle child.

“Bella,” Zidane took a step towards the rather frustrated young girl. “I know we’re all a little confused and maybe a little out of our element, but you know I would do anything to protect you.”

“Even if that means lie?”

“Why would Daddy lie to us?” Alex looked between everyone from their elbows.

“I wouldn’t,” Zidane iterated, his eyes darting between the princesses. “I never purposefully keep things from any of you. Sometimes it’s just not the right moment. You have to learn to read a room.”

“Well, then read it!” Bella threw her arms out at her side. Finally, her frustration was boiling over the top. She felt powerless to do anything for herself. Zidane looked to her silently. “I think now’s a good time as any, Daddy.”

Finally, Zidane sheepishly shrugged. “You’re right,” He told her. “After dinner tonight, I’m flying to Lindblum. And... I’ll probably be gone for a few days.”

“But why?” Alex looked at him with wide eyes.

Again, Zidane fell silent. The yearning to tell the truth was strong, but he did not want to illicit fear or alarm. Looking between the girl’s, however, with their stoic and cloudy eyes, he couldn’t help but think maybe he was doing more harm withholding information from them. Zidane sighed. Sarah wrung

her hands together at thought of her family drama taking place just moments before Dante's arrival.

"Eiko activated a War Committee. The nation's are meeting to discuss this," Zidane told them with no rhythm in his voice. "I need to be there so we'll be ready for anything here at the castle."

"War?" Sarah stepped forward now, her bold eyebrows folding together. "Because of what happened last night in Alexandria? I thought..." She glanced to her brooding younger sister. "I thought Bella just lost control of the summon."

Slowly, Zidane shook his head. "No. Someone took the summon away from Bella."

Sarah's blue eyes studied Zidane's face closely. Her irises darted across his tired skin. "It's happening again..." Sarah's entire body stiffened and her hands curled into fists. "Daddy, this can't be true. There was so much suffering all those years ago. Who in their right mind would want that to happen again!?"

"There's a type of person in this world," Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. "There will always be people who simply want things to burn, Sarah."

“And why is it *our* responsibility to clean their messes up?!”

Zidane bit down on his lip and tasted copper. He was about to reply when Steiner entered the dining hall, presenting Dinora, Lucen, and Dante. They were dressed in their absolute best. The two Bare men wore cotton tunics with pearly buttons. They wore coats that had been freshly ironed, their suspenders reaching up the length of their torso. Beside them, Dinora gleamed in a black dinner dress. There was a silence in the room as the royal family collected themselves and the Bare's tried their hardest to remain poised and polite. The room faltered into a quietness that was beginning to grow very noticeable. Quickly, Dinora grabbed Lucen's arm, arching her eyebrows. Sheepishly he stepped forward, extending a box that had been tucked beneath his arms.

“For you, Princess Sarah,” He said. Sarah’s cheeks immediately heated up. “It is our thanks for being most kind to our son.”

Sarah’s mind was still reeling. Her nervousness for the dinner had completely evaporated. It had been replaced with the anxiety of her father’s new agenda. A war? Sarah was in utter disbelief it could

ever happen again. Everything Doctor Tot had told her had been so wild— how could they possibly find themselves in the same predicament? What had her father and mother actually fought for? And Sarah's worries lay in where it left her and her sister's. What were they to do? Sarah considered, briefly, the thought of her own mother laying her crown down to serve the world in battle. But Sarah tremored at the thought of battlegrounds and seeing people dead.

Quickly, she shook her head and came closer to Lucen. She pressed her hands into the side of the box, looking at the eager family. "Thank you," She told them as she tenderly opened the box. She was greeted by a pair of slippers that were a light blue, see through, and sparkly. The toes were adorned with large white satin bows that gleamed in the candlelight. They were quite dainty and cute.

"Dinora made those for you," Lucen told her.

Sarah hugged the box against her chest. She felt like crying. And she wasn't sure it was tears of joy or pure terror. "Thank you," She breathed lightly. "I'll cherish these, always." Alex was at her side in a moments notice, peering her big dark eyes into the box.

“Oh! These are so pretty!” She grabbed hold of the shoes, bringing them out to show the rest of the group. She clacked the soles together and grinned. “Leather bottoms! Fancy!”

“Well,” Zidane did his best to grin, looking between the guests. “Shall we?”

At the beginning of dinner, conversation was rather minimal. Everyone shuffled about their plate, enjoying the well-cooked meal. For Zidane, he practically had to force himself to eat. It all tasted like ash and slid uncomfortably down his throat. He tried to forget the next few days that laid ahead of him, but the sight of his daughter’s brought back the awful realization of the tedious balance the world rest on. As the two families dined on the appetizer, Sarah couldn’t help her eyes from flitting across the table. Dante’s dark eyes would meet her and the two would grin bashfully. But Sarah couldn’t give completely into the feeling. Not when she looked at her father and saw his mountain of stress.

As the main course was delivered, conversation began to pick up. Roasted duck surrounded by a bed of greens arrived. Along with the horrid liver

pudding that Lucen seemed delighted to see. There was also smoked jerkey and a fresh fruit salad, sliced and diced to perfection. Everything was so lavish to the Bare's, but they concealed their surprise and were modest in their plating. Lucen and Dinora were prompted to talk about their lives in Lindblum. Before they had children, they made a meager income with small booths displaying their wares. But it was far too competitive in Lindblum, not to mention hectic. Dinora wanted someplace wholesome and quiet for their future family, which drove them to Alexandria with starry eyed dreams with what they could become. They were pleased to hear the King had also lived most of his young life in Lindblum before setting out for a larger horizon. Zidane boasted of his girl's gifts: Sarah's well-trained calligraphy, Bella's interest in herbs and spices, and Alex's inclination on piano. The Bare's seemed so fascinated with the girls and cherished everything they learned of the princesses. But they were very curious about Zidane.

“Your Majesty,” Lucen smiled as he tore his jerky apart. “Tell me, what brought you to Alexandria all those years ago in your youth?”

Zidane could only offer a modest grin, casting his eyes down on his duck. The moist meat gleamed in

the candlelight. “I was an actor,” Zidane said, holding in a laugh of woe and nostalgia. “I performed in ‘I Want To Be Your Canary’. Are you familiar with it?”

“Why, it was the Queen’s favorite show,” Dinora replied. “In fact, Dante played Marcus in a school rendition of it.”

“Mom,” Dante said blandly. “They don’t care about that. I was twelve years old—I was awful.”

Sarah couldn’t help but grin with the rosiest of cheeks. “O, Sweet Marcus.”

The young boy turned the shade of a tomato. Dinora reached around the table, giving Dante a nudge. “Come on, now, play along. It should come as no surprise the princesses are well-versed in Lord Avon.”

“They’re well-versed,” Dante replied. “I was forced to read it as a kid.”

Sarah could only find herself fascinated with the flustered boy. “I fear I love thee more than I should.” Dante looked across the table at her with almost glossy dark eyes. Though he knew it was only part of the script, he wondered if she would ever dream to say those words to him in a real affinity.

Cautiously, he looked around the table, his eyes laying on the king. Zidane seemed entertained as he drank his water.

“Princess...” Dante began, almost weakly. His voice nearly faltered in the large room. “Wilt thou be happy married to a lowly peasant such as I?”

Sarah seemed energized at the idea of having someone to act her favorite story out with. But between their eye contact, the words resonated as if they were truly speaking to each other. “Prithee, call me ‘princess’ no more! Marcus, wilt thou cherish me—”

Her recitement was interrupted when the doors of the dining hall flew open. Zidane came to his feet, everyone’s else heads snapping over their shoulders. In the corners of the room, the guards readied themselves with their hands on the hilts of their swords. The large oak doors swung fully, slamming against the walls. It echoed through the chambers as the families eating dinner lay eyes on a sore sight. In the large arching threshold was a young woman with long and knotted blonde hair. Her thin wiry body shook. Blood stained her lips and her porcelain skin. She tremored, her arm coming to wrap around her torso, which had

suffered a great wound, causing blood to soak through her clothes. Though her current condition was quite shocking—everyone was more astounded by the fact that she was an utter clone of Zidane. She lifted her head weakly, revealing her bright blue eyes plagued in pain. Behind her, her tail was nearly limp, hanging off of her spine.

“Mikoto!” Zidane’s voice echoed through the room before he had realized he had even spoke. He hurried across the room, catching her as she began to fall forward on her knees. He cocked her head up in the crook of his arm, brushing all the dirty hair from the frame of her face. Hurriedly, he pushed her hands aside to find a sizzling burn had caught her on the side of her torso. It was crusty and nasty. It seemed as if the wound had continually been reopened. Zidane was speechless, his heart thudding in his chest.

“Zidane... it’s happening again...” She said hoarsely. The vibration of her own vocal cords sent a wrack of pain through her and she constricted in Zidane’s arms. “The black mages... they’ve...” Mikoto stopped to cough, blood splattering across her crimson lips.

“They’ve what?!” Zidane cupped her cheek. “Did they stop? Did someone attack the village?”

Mikoto was quiet for a moment, laboring to keep air in her lungs. “They... attacked me...”

Zidane tenderly ran his hand along her flushed chin before looking towards the nearest guards. “Get her to the infirmary *now*,” He pointed to another guard. “Find Doctor Tot.” As Mikoto was carried out of sight, Zidane came to his feet slowly, a numbness sinking through his entire body. His white button up and cuffs were stained in dark blood. He raked his hands through his hair before remembering he had an audience. The Bare’s were quiet, staring with a somberness. Zidane was worried they knew all too well. But the looks on his daughter’s faces were heartbreakng. Sarah’s hand covered her open mouth. Alex had paled at the sight of all the blood that now glistened on the marble floor. And Bella looked too angry for words. The king was speechless as he stood sheepishly before the stunned people. And he couldn’t think of anything to say, so he simply turned and left, carelessly walking through Mikoto’s blood on the way out.

Zidane couldn't enter the infirmary immediately. He had bounded up the stairs on a mission. But upon hearing the shouts and movement on the other side of the door, he couldn't help but stop. Zidane shrugged out of his coat, carelessly dropping it on the ground. He rolled his sleeves to try to hide the dark blood staining his cuffs. But the sight of his midriff only sent him into more emotional turmoil. Zidane pressed his back into the cool wall, listening to the clattering of medical tools through the door. With shaky hands, he ran his fingers along his face and through his hair.

Since Mikoto's arrival to Gaia, she had completely dedicated herself to trying to become a normal person. Zidane had proven it was possible to live beyond her original means. She had chosen to stay in the Black Mage Village. She would claim for years following her arrival that the Black Mages were the best teachers for the book of life. Together, the Black Mages and the Genome had lived side by side, teaching each other and learning from each other how to live a blissful life while not allowing the figment of death to stunt their happiness. But now, things were going horribly wrong.

Zidane's body was beginning to shake. His breathing grew uneven. He slid down against the

wall, pressing his hands to his chin and bobbing his knee to offset his tremors. He bit down on his lip, chewing on his own tongue. All Zidane could see flashing before his eyes was Vivi. Zidane had never seen Vivi again after the final fight at the Iifa Tree. One of the most devastating things that had happened to him was returning to learn Vivi had stopped. But his friends had always told him of the year of wonderfulness that Vivi had lived in a peaceful world. He had rallied the Black Mage Village back to a bustling community. And he had been the one, in a way, to keep the group together like glue mixed with hope. Tears began to fog Zidane's eyes and he drooped his head. He couldn't help but blame himself for everything. Where Zidane went, misery eventually followed, he was convinced. He was singlehandedly destroying Alexandria, his family, his friendships, and the world all over again. He pressed his sticky palms to his eyes as the hot tears continued.

“Daddy?” His head snapped up, tears still rolling down his flushed cheeks. Standing just a few feet short down the hallway were his three daughters. Alex gripped Sarah’s hand tightly. It broke the princesses hearts to see their father in tears. Quickly,

he began wiping them away and stood up. He had no words for them.

“Where are the Bare’s?” Zidane croaked, his eyes pulsating.

“Downstairs,” Sarah replied, glancing to Bella’s stone hard face. “They’re concerned like we are.”

“Daddy, who is Mikoto?” Alex asked with scared dark eyes. “And... why was she bloody?”

Zidane had to close his eyes as an aggressive headache began to wash over him. The tears threatened again as he continually relived her breathy words. He could feel her trembles against him. It was as painful as Dagger’s last breaths. Zidane’s voice was husky and full of hurt. “She’s... my sister.”

“Sister?” Sarah echoed, arching her eyebrows. “You never told us you had a sister.”

“She lives very far away from here,” Zidane pressed his back against the wall again.

“Was she hurt by the same people who want to hurt our kingdom?” Sarah asked. Zidane was silent and Sarah pursed her lips. “This is why you feel responsible to clean up other people’s messes, isn’t

it? It's much more personal than you let on. Daddy, you're part of the mess, aren't you?"

Zidane pushed away from the wall now and approached his daughters, swinging his arms out and pressing them all against him. Tenderly, he kissed each of them on the top of their heads. "I promise things will make sense soon. I just..." He stopped again as his throat pulsated.

"Whoever it is was, was waiting for their moment," Bella said darkly, walking a few paces from her family. She crossed her arms over her chest, brooding over the entire situation. "I've set off an entire chain of reactions."

"It wasn't you, necessarily," Zidane shook his head. The pain of Bella's blame hurt him.

"Then who is doing this?" Bella turned to him, her eyes piercing his. "Who was waiting this entire time, knowing a moment like this would arise again after so long?"

Again, Zidane closed his eyes and for a moment, he thought his entire body would hit the ground. The past two decades washed over him like oily water that he just couldn't shake. Just before he opened his

lips, the door to the infirmary opened and Doctor Tot appeared.

“Ah, Zidane,” Doctor Tot seemed relieved to find him. “You can come in now.”

Zidane turned in an instant. “Is she...?”

“She’ll be fine for the time being. We’ve dressed the wound and placed her in a comfy bed with lots of quilts. She has lost... quite a bit of blood so she may be rather foggy in the mind,” Doctor Tot reported. “I expect she’ll make a recovery. Slowly, but surely.”

Zidane nodded, feeling relief wash over him. He looked towards his daughter’s. “Why don’t you three bid the Bare’s goodnight? I need to be with Mikoto right now.” Sarah nodded, her eyes unreadable. She collected Alex’s hand and wrapped her arm around the nearly fuming Bella. He watched them go with a pang in his heart, but drew in a deep breath and entered the infirmary.

A nurse was tenderly washing Mikoto’s ratty and knotted hair. She used a damp cloth to slowly work the blood stains out from her long locks. She had been given a cotton white nightgown with dainty shimmering strings dangling from the collar. She

was pale with deep purple surrounding her dull eyes. When she saw Zidane, however, she mustered up the conservative grin she had learned to express in her time on Gaia.

“Mikoto, thank the gods,” Zidane sighed, sinking into a stool beside her bed. He reached out, gently touching her chilled hands. “I’m glad to see you awake.”

The nurse finished washing the girl’s nearly ashen hair. She gave it a curt brushing and pulled it back to the nape of her neck. She then curtsied and hustled away with the sloshing bucket of grimey water. Mikoto sighed, pressing her damp head to the pillow. “I’m told I crashed a dinner party.”

“It wasn’t anything of importance,” Zidane assured her. “How do you feel? I want to ask you some things, but only if you’re up to it.”

Mikoto adjusted herself on the bed with effort, groaning in the process. But she nodded to Zidane with her flushed cheeks. “I am fine.”

“Well,” Zidane situated himself in his stool. “How the hell did you get here? And what happened to you?”

Again, Mikoto's weakened grin appeared. "These were the questions I was expecting. It all happened just a few weeks ago. I woke up one morning in the village and all was fine. The crops were growing in nicely. Mr. 384 had finally managed to incubate another Chocobo egg. And then, they all just paused that evening. It was... an eerie silence. Like being on Terra again. It felt... lifeless. And they all turned on me with their staffs. I started to run into the forest. One of them knicked me with a lightening bolt."

Zidane pursed his lips, his insides drenching in a chill. "What day of the month was it, Mikoto?"

"It was..." She paused and closed her eyes. Her brow furrowed in thought. "Maybe the... sixteenth?"

Zidane's heart nearly stopped beating. Sarah's birthday gala was on the sixteenth. Zidane raked his hands through his hair. "So, what happened after you escaped the Black Mages?"

"I went to Madain Sari," Mikoto told him. "It was raining very heavily."

"Raining? In Madain Sari?" Zidane arched his eyebrows. Behind him, Doctor Tot withdrew in his

mind to review the weather reports of the region he had memorized from the past one hundred years.

Mikoto nodded. “Yes. A woman named Lani lived there with a few young children. She gave me a boat she had built. And a little bit of food. She helped stopped the bleeding, too, before I left.”

“So, for the last two weeks...”

“I have been trying to get here, to you, yes,” Mikoto nodded. “You were the only person I thought of that would heed this warning. I... I do not know who, but Garland or Kuja are back, Zidane. Maybe not physically, they may have people working for them—but they’re the only ones who can harness power strong enough to steal Eidolons and control mass armies.”

“How do you know only Garland or Kuja could possess a power like that? How can we be so sure it’s really them again? I saw them die before my own eyes, Mikoto,” Zidane shook his head, not wanting to believe it.

“I trust the awful feeling I have in my stomach, Zidane,” Mikoto told him, lifting her head from her pillow. “And I know you have the same feeling. It’s

their presence. One of them— maybe even both of them— are still alive.”

“But *how?*” Zidane ground his teeth together.

“Whatever happened on the sixteenth... it triggered something. It’s caused a repeat in the Cycle of Souls. The one’s that lay dormant or lost in the muck Terra had created... they’ve been recycled. And the process is starting all over again.”

“But we destroyed Terra,” Zidane countered.

“Then the souls will reap here, on Gaia,” Mikoto looked to him with her clouded blue eyes. “They need somewhere to go. The souls that were on Terra — Garland and Kuja’s... they were all forgotten until the trigger happened.”

Zidane drew his lips into a line and looked to Doctor Tot almost gravely. He stood, casting a look over Mikoto. “I need you to go to Lindblum with me. I’ll have some doctor’s carry you out to the ship in a little bit. Your information will be useful for the War Committee,” He took in a deep breath, nearly hunching his shoulders. “It looks like we’re in for much more than we bargained for.”

Bella and Alex had disappeared to their rooms. Bella was simply upset. And Alex was stressed out. Dinora and Lucen had walked home early, leaving Dante and Sarah to sit together in the dark, foggy garden. Dante's black jacket hung on Sarah's wiry frame. She hugged herself as they sat side by side on the cracked marble stairs. The dense fog rose from the wide river that had carried Dante's parents away nearly half an hour ago. Dante glanced to Sarah. Her eyes seemed sad as she watched the moonlight glimmer across the turbulent surface of the water. Sarah felt his eyes and did a double-take at Dante, blinking rapidly.

"I'm really sorry for what happened tonight," Sarah told him, nearly embarrassed.

Dante was quiet for a moment, licking his lips. "What did you feel when that woman came through the door with all those wounds?"

"Well," Sarah shrugged. "Terrified, naturally. The pain she must have felt..."

"Makes you wonder what's going to happen," Dante said quietly, looking to Sarah. "We're going to war, aren't we? In the last war, I learned in school a blinded soldier from Burmecia ran all the way to the Lindblum Castle to warn them before he died."

“Maybe we are going to war,” Sarah looked into his dark gleaming eyes. “I’d like to hope not...”

The two young people again fell into a silence as they stared into each other’s eyes. These were the same stairs they had first sat at when they met and chatted at her birthday gala. How sad it felt to be sitting here now in the cold night, thinking about the gray clouds on the horizon. Dante’s breath puffed out before him as he looked at Sarah.

“Where does that leave you, Sarah?” He asked breathily. “The royals are always sitting ducks in war. What will you do?”

Sarah looked up at the stars and pursed her lips. “I’m not sure. My father would never allow me to fight. Not that I know how, anyway.”

Dante’s hand covered hers on the chilled stone step. “What if I taught you how to defend yourself?”

She looked to him with surprised blue eyes, her eyebrows arched. “What are you talking about?”

“I can teach you to fight,” Dante told her. “Real steel. An actual sword. I’ll make one for you and everything.”

Sarah's eyes were nearly full of heart break. "Do you... really think we'll have to fight?"

Dante's hand came up to cup her cheek. Tenderly his thumb ran across her smooth skin. He couldn't think of anything to say. So, he leaned forward, gently pressing his lips to her's.

14. Another Lifetime

Chapter Fourteen

The moon was high in the sky and the creatures chirped and hooted across the distances. Zidane's entire body ached and his eyes were scorched red from his lack of sleep. He stood in the castle's airship dock, watching as guard's hurriedly packed essentials and strapped down equipment and gear. Two doctor's whizzed by Zidane, carrying an unconscious Mikoto on a cot that made her head bob. Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, watching the pale girl disappear beneath the deck with the doctor's. The sound of clacking boots rang out across the bay. A moment passed before thick brunette curls filled the corner of Zidane's eye. Beatrix stood beside him, watching the commotion of the airship.

“Do you think what Mikoto said is true?” Beatrix asked, turning her good eye on him. “Do you think it’s possible the Cycle of Souls has restarted?”

Zidane merely shrugged. He felt like his entire body was simply shutting down. He couldn’t accept

anything, but he couldn't deny anything. "Who am I to say? Anything's possible."

"Are you sure Steiner shouldn't go with you instead?" Beatrix arched her eyebrow. "He faced all the same atrocities by your side. Wouldn't it be wiser to put him on the War Committee?"

Zidane was quiet and still, watching a soldier fumble with a strap over a crate. "I want you to go with me, Beatrix." He told her without even looking at her.

"But why?"

"It's two in the morning," Zidane glanced to her now with irritated eyes. "There's no more time to ask questions now, Beatrix. Inform the captain I'm ready to take flight within the hour. I'm going to tell the girl's goodbye." And with that, he curtly turned and left Beatrix amongst the midnight bustle of the airship dock. She watched with pursed lips and gazed across the bay, finding Steiner who was busy organizing Knights of Pluto to streamline medical gear and money for the king. He watched them race away and then searched Beatrix out, finding her eyes already on him.

“I’m guessing I’m staying here in Alexandria,” Steiner said, coming to stand beside the general who was growing lost in thought. “Zidane must have good reason, Beatrix.”

Beatrix placed a hand to her chin. “So predictable in many ways... yet so elusive in other ways. Sometimes, I wish Zidane would just come out and say it.”

Steiner watched the busy workers finish strapping the equipment down. “He has a lot on his mind. And a lot on his plate. It’s fine. I will stay here and watch after the princesses. That is a job in and of itself.” Beatrix looked towards her darling husband and grinned. Even after nearly fifteen years of marriage, Steiner still turned the color of a tomato at Beatrix’s smile.

“You’re right. It is a monumental task,” Beatrix told him. She turned towards Steiner. “You do a remarkable job, as well. The girl’s adore you. I suppose keeping the princesses safe is a top priority. There’s nobody better for the task than you, Steiner.”

Steiner couldn’t help but smile at the thought of the three young girls. “In a lot of ways, it’s like visiting the best parts of my life when I used to care for young Garnet.” In the next moment, Beatrix’s

eyes grew glossy and she looked away, blinking rapidly. Steiner reached forward, wrapping his arms around her small but sturdy body. “Let’s go get some coffee before you leave. It’s too loud in here.”

Tenderly, he directed the general out, who kept her head ducked low, concealing her tears from those around her. As they crunched through the foggy garden towards their living quarters, Beatrix stopped, unwinding herself from Steiner’s arms. She looked out towards the quiet river, listening to the frogs croak. Steiner watched as she rubbed her tears away on the backs of her glove wraps that wound up her thin arms. She took in a deep breath, her eyelashes fluttering as, again, the tears returned.

“When I was much younger, the idea of war used to excite me,” Beatrix said with a voice that was deflated. Steiner simply watched his wife patiently. ‘Getting to use my sword, slashing through appendages, and painting the cobblestone red... it all seemed so enticing for some reason. I’m sure it came from my father. Y’know, being a war general himself. But today, Steiner... the idea of going to war... it scares me now. And... I don’t know what changed.’ She looked to him with a face contorted in confusion and hurt. In the honeysuckle trees surrounding them, the cicadas chirped loudly,

falling on deaf ears. “Twenty years ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to enlist in the next War Counsel. I wouldn’t have thought twice about joining an infantry. I never questioned the obscurity of politics or feelings surrounding war.” She shook her head, her thick brunette curls falling against her shoulders. “But now... all I can think about is how wrong this is. How terrifying it is. Steiner, I could lose you and I wouldn’t know what to do. Or... what if something happened to Zidane? I’d never forgive myself.”

Steiner was quiet for a moment, joining Beatrix in looking out over the river. It had grown calm in the middle of the night. The gondola’s had stopped circulating around the castle. Slowly, he licked his lips, placing his hands behind his back. “The war twenty years ago was very different. We were younger, Beatrix. In a way, it was like we all had nothing to lose. The stakes are higher now. We have more lives to account for now.”

“I didn’t want anything to change,” Beatrix said, keeping her glossy eyes trained forward. “For the past sixteen years with the princesses... everything was wonderful. Besides losing Garnet, I think this was the happiest the castle had ever been in a long time, Steiner. I’m watching that all get extinguished

right before my eyes and I feel... powerless to stop any of it.”

“With due time, the fog will lift... we’ll know what we’re actually up against,” Steiner assured her. Beatrix turned towards him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Tenderly, he put his arms around her, rubbing her back soothingly.

“Just please... don’t die on me, Steiner,” She whispered, her hot tears pressing against his prickly jaw. He tensed and pursed his lips, only holding her tighter.

The room was dark besides the faintest sliver of light coming in through the opened door. Zidane was sitting on the side of Alex’s bed, watching solemnly as the youngest princess slept. She was curled and tangled up in her sheets, her face sunken into the pillow. Longingly, Zidane reached out, carefully moving a bang from her forehead. He desperately did not want to leave. He wanted to pretend Eiko’s War Committee was nothing but a large sham. He wanted to treat it like a joke that didn’t concern him. Zidane wanted to wake up the next morning to see his girl’s bright faces at breakfast. But he knew,

tomorrow would only bring long-winded conferences with Zidane gazing out the wall-length windows for a taste of freedom. Zidane sighed and leaned forward, gently kissing Alex's temple. She stirred slightly at his touch. Zidane caressed her cheek.

"I love you, princess," He whispered tenderly. Carefully, he lifted himself from her bed and quietly closed the door behind him. Zidane pursed his lips, already thinking about the heart break he'd continue to receive as he went to Bella and Sarah's chambers. Cautiously, Zidane opened Bella's bedroom door and peered in. It was dark, as well, and he could vaguely make out the shape of a figure in bed.

Zidane treaded across the dark chambers, walking along the thin veil of light that poured in. Bella had her back to Zidane. He watched her even breathing take the quilts up and down. As he stared at her slender body, Zidane couldn't help but become drenched in guilt and shame. What could have been beautiful and a monumental identity for Bella, had floundered and was no better than murky rain water. Zidane brought himself to the side of the bed, pressing his forehead against her shoulder.

“I love you, Arabella,” He whispered. Gently, he pressed his hand into her arm. ‘I wish I could have done better for you... but I just want you safe...’ “Slowly, he pulled himself away from his middle child and crept quietly across the floor towards the door. As he gripped the doorknob, he heard stirring in Bella’s bed and he looked over his shoulder to see her tear stained cheeks and wet doe eyes gazing after him.” Arabella? You’re awake?’ Zidane came to the end of her bed. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“You have to leave?” Bella asked, sitting up. She held the quilts close to her, as if they were her only protection from the world around her.

After a moment of hesitation, Zidane nodded. “This is important. You should go back to bed.”

“I had an awful dream.”

Zidane navigated around the bed again, coming to sit down beside her. He fluffed the quilts that swallowed her wiry body. “What happened?” Zidane asked, laying down on the pillow beside her. She gazed towards her father, nearly shivering.

“There was a tall man with white hair...” She whispered. Zidane watched her face keenly with only the one sliver of light coming in through the

door. ‘He was dressed in these long white sheets. And he... he was quoting ‘I Want to be a Canary’, but... it was so eerie.’ Bella furrowed her brow as she recalled the foggy daze. “He said I was part of the final act— one that was lost with history. He told me I’d know my role and my lines when the time came.” Bella paused for a moment and huffed, shifting beneath the quilts. Zidane looked at her as a chill rolled over him. “It doesn’t sound as scary when I just say it out loud. But... I was terrified, Daddy.”

Zidane had to steady himself as he reached out, gently combing her short dark locks from the frame of her face. “It’s okay, Bella. It was just a dream.” Zidane’s stomach constricted tightly into wound up knots. How would he ever even fit a nap in on the airship now? Mikoto was right, though he didn’t want to believe it. He wanted to chalk her worries up to blood loss and a foggy mind. But what she said was true. Kuja was still alive. And he was still wanting to play his meticulous tricks.

The two were quiet for a moment. Bella’s dark eyes searched her father’s face. “There’s really going to be another war, isn’t there?”

“Maybe so,” Zidane eventually said. Behind Bella’s dark curtains, the nocturnal creatures croaked and belched beyond the windows. “I don’t like to think so but...”

“Did I cause this?” Bella asked, breathily. “Please tell me the truth.”

Zidane pursed his lips and his insides constricted again. In those dark coffee brown eyes, he saw her unsettlement. She looked so truly upset, lost, frightened, and confused. It was the same look that had plagued her mother years before when things seemingly fell apart and seemed useless. Zidane felt like he was suffering a bout of *déjà vu* and the very thing he swore to never let happen again, was.

“It wasn’t you,” Zidane shook his head, his blond hair rustling against the many pillows arranged on her bed. He sighed at the thought of leaving his girl’s during this time. He reached out and grabbed Bella’s slender hand. “There’s a lot that’s going to come to light during this, Bella. And these are things...” He paused for a moment, looking at her hurt face. “They are things I’m not ready to talk about yet. I can confidently tell you none of this is your fault.”

“Is it Auntie Eiko’s fault?” Bella whispered.

“No,” Zidane replied after a beat of hesitation.
“It’s my fault, Bella.”

Zidane’s eyes were throbbing and blisteringly red as he finally said goodbye to his daughter’s and collected his things into a duffel bag. As his boots echoed through the high vaulted ceilings of the midnight-desserted castle, he couldn’t help but feel lower than low. His bag thumped against his hip with every movement as his irritated eyes darted about, looking to every candle perched on the wall, every painting hanging from a nail, and every tapestry wavering in the faint breeze. As he entered the corridor to the airship dock, he couldn’t help but be overcome by a wave of anxiety. What really was waiting for them on the other side of this? What truly had happened? The Summoner in Bella had set in motion a series of events. But as Zidane came into the spacious and empty feeling airship dock, he couldn’t help but blame his own selfish wants and desires. If Zidane wasn’t alive, none of this would have even been possible.

He found Beatrix with her own bag waiting by the catwalk that would carry them aboard the ship. The hum of the airship began to grow in volume at

the sight of the king. Beatrix had been gazing off into nothing, but snapped to when she saw Zidane. “Are you ready?”

Zidane paused. “I guess as I’ll ever be.” He continued across the ramp and opened the hatch to descend below. He stopped to look at Beatrix who detached the catwalk and closed the gating on the deck. She signalled to the captain through the bay windows and turned to stare out into the sanguid night that droned on and on. ‘Beatrix,’ Zidane said, catching her attention. “We should try to get some sleep. I imagine the counsel will begin early in the morning.”

The airship began to shudder as it pulled out of bay. “I doubt I’ll be doing any of that,” Beatrix told them. They burst from the airship dock and Beatrix’s chestnut brown hair was blasted over her shoulders. Zidane looked behind him as they began to climb into the sky. It always was a nice feeling, he thought. Beatrix took a moment to compose herself. “I think I’ll stay out here awhile. You should get some sleep.”

“No sleep makes a war general sloppy,” Zidane warned, almost teasingly.

Beatrix tried her best to smile. “I’ll be along in a bit. I just... want to look at Alexandria.”

Zidane glanced over his shoulder, catching the top of the towering Alexandrian Castle. It caused a pang in his chest and he drew his eyes away. He weakly nodded to Beatrix. “Good night, Beatrix.” He clunked down the stairs, spying two open cabin doors facing each other towards the end of the hall. Zidane would find Mikoto in the morning. He was sure she was resting.

Zidane chose the last door on the left. In his years as King, he had reduced airship expenditures greatly. Lindblum had exponentially expanded theirs. Zidane allowed Lindblum to be the kingdom in the skies. He was pleased to have two rather large foot soldier squadrons; the Knights of Pluto and Squad Beatrix. They had harmonized together into a cohesive unit and rapidly grew by the weeks. All the living quarters on this ship were seemingly equal. Just wide enough to ward off claustrophobia. It was cozy enough with a wide bed, night tables, a desk, and even a wash basin. The closet was modest, too. Zidane kicked the door shut and turned towards the bed, carelessly disregarding his duffle bag. He ripped the zipper open, pushing his daggers aside. He began to reach for a clean shirt when the closet

door burst open and someone's arms came around Zidane's neck.

Instinctively, Zidane reared up, grounding his teeth together. He back pedaled his feet, slamming the unknown person into the wall behind him. A high pitched squeak came out of them as Zidane tried to break the grip. Glancing towards the slender hands encasing him, he gathered it was a woman. She had no weapons in her hand, except for a syringe with a clear transluscent gel in it. From behind, the attacker took Zidane's moment of pause to ram their knee into the base of his spine. Zidane let out a yelp and swiveled, hurling the intruder over his shoulder and onto to the floor. They were masked in long black cloaks, wearing woolen black gloves. He still couldn't see their face. Zidane reached out to grab them, but their leg swung out, nailing Zidane in the chest. His breath exited quickly and he was hurled back into the wall again. Taking a moment to recompose himself, he barely caught her arms to ward her off as she tried to stick him with the sharp needle. They struggled against each other.

"What the hell is that stuff?!" Zidane rasped, wincing against her weight. She lashed at him again and Zidane used his entire body to shove her backwards. They landed on the bed and Zidane held

their wrist down. He again attempted to remove the hood but took a left hook from her free hand, sending him off the side of the bed. He thumped against the dresser, making it rattle back and forth. Just as he lifted his head, the dark figure was already leaping over the side of the bed, falling on top of him. Zidane caught hold of their wrists, using all his might to keep them off. They snapped their body back and forth with unrelenting energy. In one deft move, Zidane released their wrists and shoved forcefully against their chest, hurling them back against the wall. Zidane scrambled onto the bed and ripped his daggers from his duffel bag, spilling the rest of its contents across the floor. The dark figure came silently to their feet and began to move, but Zidane charged forward and used his arm to slam their throat against the wall. Tenderly, he pressed the tip of his dagger to their stomach.

The beginning of a swelling bruise was rising on Zidane's cheekbone. His lip had been busted open and one of his eyebrows had been split. He breathed heavily, giving into all his pain to press the stranger against the wall. Zidane held the dagger steady. "Who are you?" Zidane asked. He waited a few beats, knowing they wouldn't speak. He gave them a forceful press into the wall. 'I asked you a question!'

Another silence. Zidane kept the dagger against them as he forced the hood off, rustling red hair in all kinds of directions. His eyes widened and he took a step back, holding his dagger in front of him. "... Fauna?"

It was the exotic and mysterious woman from Ruby's theatre. Her exuberant green eyes were trained on him. But they looked so utterly betraying. There was nothing in her eyes. She seemed devoid of any emotion. The sultry girl he had fleetingly known for an evening had, somehow, become a seemingly emotionless assassin. Zidane stared at her intently, a warm trail of blood coming down his temple. Slowly, he looked towards the syringe that gleamed in the low lighting of the room.

"What is that?" Zidane asked, his eyes darting back to her's. "What's going on?"

"I thought you were going to be someone else," Fauna replied, drawing her shoulders back. She held a stone hard look on her face.

"And who were you expecting?" Zidane cocked his eyebrows up.

"Someone I know that uses this room very frequently," Fauna told him. Her velvety voice had

not alluded her. It came out melodic and clear, like an angel, despite who it belonged to. “Why, every time this airship is called upon— they choose this room.”

Zidane wracked his memory. He took to the skies maybe a dozen times a year. He thought back to trips to Treno, when Steiner insisted on the airship to avoid the moody underbelly of Treno that washed up on the tram. And when they made visits to Lindblum for spring outings. He traced Beatrix’s steps. And Steiner’s. He traced after the girl’s and slowly, a tingle came over his spine. He saw flashes of Bella trudging down the hallway, stacks of books in hand, heading straight to the rear of the ship’s cabins. Zidane’s eyes flashed to Fauna with a look of fire.

“What’s in the syringe?” Zidane demanded, holding his daggers up now. “You sick bastard. You were using me that night to get to my daughter? Who are you? Who do you work for?”

“You catch on quickly,” Fauna grinned, tucking the syringe into a bag on her hip. Zidane clenched as he watched. “But only when all the clues are laid out right in front of you.”

“You’re one of Kuja’s goons, aren’t you?” Zidane sneered. Fauna’s grin and composed face never

faltering. “Whatever he wants, he’s not gonna get it. Especially when it comes to my daughter’s. He’s a fool, anyway. Bella hasn’t tamed any summons.”

“*You’re* the fool,” Fauna coyly turned her head to the side. “We don’t want to extract any summons from her. She’s far too young. She’d never survive the process. We want *her*.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna happen,” Zidane shook his head. “You’re cornered in a cabin on an airship heading directly to Lindblum. And here you are, tellin’ me your whole plan. You’ll never get to Arabella. It’s not her you want, anyway. It’s all just a guise because I know Kuja wants me.”

Fauna smirked and flipped her hair over her shoulder, confidently fixing the cloaks on her slender body. “You’re so full of yourself, just like he said you would be.”

Zidane’s entire body clenched for a moment. “Why else would you want my daughter?”

“You really haven’t connected the dots yet, have you?” Fauna flashed her pearly grin in a mocking way. She adjusted the gloves on her hand and fluffed the hood on her coat. ‘There is still a grand hope for this planet. A strong vision for it that is still quite

attainable. But now... we have the true answer to the question, all thanks to you, Your Majesty.' Zidane still only stared at her with a stone-like composure. "You may like to think all havoc leads back to you. Oh, how you truly were the perfect Angel of Death. But yet— there is still a flaw with you: you were created by Garland, that wretched old man." Fauna crossed her arms over her chest as Zidane could only woefully grow angry over the bullshit she had been fed. "And, of course, Kuja may have his flaws. Mikoto? Completely useless." She waved her hand dismissively and suddenly, her smile got even brighter. "But Arabella Alexandros-Tribal? She's perfect, don't you see, Zidane? Not as a means to find mass destruction. But as a way to *create* it. She is part Genome, part Summoner. *She* is the answer to all that was lost those years ago. Kuja only failed because he was not patient enough. He acted prematurely. But, Your Majesty," She grinned, chuckling lightly. "He's learned his lesson. And the timing could never be better."

Zidane's entire body waxed and waned between hot and cold. For some moments, he was unbelievable angry and wanted to drive his blade straight through her. But the next, anguish would flood him as he remembered the entire ordeal; she

was merely a cog in the whole greased machine. If Kuja had someone like her working for him, his defenses and plan seemed much more elaborate, to not mention sneaky. Zidane pursed his lips, absorbing her words. Fauna watched with great interest, it seemed. Zidane's guard never fell, however.

"How can the timing be any better?" Zidane shook his head. "We destroyed Terra."

"Yes and when the Iifa Tree crumpled and withered, it trapped all those poor souls, damning them to an eternal life of listlessness. Now that Kuja has nursed the tree back to life, we can reverse the damage and set free the souls that were meant to roam this planet. Like, my own. I owe my life to Kuja," Fauna straightened her shoulders. "Terra was useless. Just another hurdle in the master plan. We don't need Terra. We only need Gaia."

"You know we're never going to let that happen, right?" Zidane furrowed his brow.

"You can fight it tooth and nail until the very end," Fauna seemed bored by the idea. "You'll fight until you die, I can promise you that."

Zidane was about to protest when Fauna lifted her hand, a sparkle of green coming from her fingertips. Zidane's entire body went limp and he fell to the floor amongst all his spilled clothes and equipment. Fauna slowly looked over his unconscious body and grinned before she removed herself from the room in the blink of an eye.

Just before the break of dawn, the Alexandrian "Royal" Airship docked at Lindblum Castle. Beatrix had slept maybe an hour or two, but had spent majority of the night alone on the deck, watching the airship dart across the landscape. She pulled her bag over her shoulder and closed her cabin door. The foot soldiers and assistants they had brought from Alexandria were already bright eyed and bushy tailed, hauling belongings towards the deck and rousing Mikoto from her slumber for breakfast. Beatrix rapped on Zidane's cabin door and paused a beat. There was no sound on the other side. She hoped maybe Zidane had gotten some precious sleep and she hated to disturb that, but Beatrix knew it was better her than Eiko bargining through the door to rile him.

Beatrix peaked into the room and when she did, she had dropped her bag in astonishment. Zidane was laid out amongst a mess of clothes and bottles of medicine. His daggers lay inches from his open palms. And his face was black, blue, green, and purple. Beatrix came forward, lifting Zidane's head and giving him a short jolt. "Zidane!" She said, shaking him again. 'Zidane, come on, wake up.' Beatrix glanced towards the vacant hallway, hearing the noise of the help die away. She cursed under her breath and looked back to the king. "Zidane, by the gods, you have to wake up." Beatrix curtly pat her hand against his cheek and she saw his eyelashes flutter.

"Beatrix..." His speech was somewhat slurred as his groggy blue eyes darted about, making sense of what was around him. "I think... I just had a really bad dream."

Beatrix shook her head, looking down at him. "I don't think it was a dream, Zidane. Unless you beat yourself up."

Slowly, Zidane propped himself up on his elbow, wincing from his lower back pain. Beatrix gripped his tender shoulder. Zidane looked around the room, still quite foggy. He blinked rapidly, but vision was

rather unclear. His mouth felt somewhat numb.
“Then... she really was here.”

“Who?” Beatrix furrowed her brow. “What happened last night, Zidane?”

“Well,” He sat up fully now, raking his messy hair from bleary eyes. “I got attacked, I can tell you that much.”

“Yes, and?” Beatrix prodded.

Zidane licked his crusty lip and looked to the war general. “Kuja’s alive, Beatrix. And he wants Arabella.”

15. The War Committee

Chapter Fifteen

Because of Zidane's need for bandages and some rest, the War Committee was postponed to after lunch. Zidane, however, was back out of bed before morning had even ended. It was a bright day in Lindblum without a cloud in the sky. From his guest bedroom, as he dressed in clean clothes, he watched the tiny-ants of Lindblum whirl around each other, on the way to work and the market. Zidane took less travelled hallways to dodge everyone for the time being. He walked stiffly in the halls, ignoring the double-takes he got from the castle help. His face was quite the mess with large painted bruises and crusty scratches. Zidane found himself back at the airship dock, glancing to workers furiously cleaning the one that had just arrived from Alexandria. Zidane was pleased, however, when he spotted the usual courier, a young man, dawdling by the railing with a canvas bag slung over his shoulder.

When he saw Zidane approaching, he immediately straightened his shoulders and stiffly bowed. "Your Majesty! Glad to see you out and

about. I was worried when they pulled you off the airship this morning.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Zidane sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck. “Are you busy today? I kind of need a message to get back to Alexandrian Castle by sundown. Think you can do it?”

The courier glanced to the ticking clock. “Yeah, if you’re quick about it I can grab the high noon ship back to Treno.” He reached into his bag, extending a pencil and some parchment. Zidane walked towards a flat surface, smoothing his hands along the curling edges of the paper.

Steiner— it’s happening again. Do not let Arabella out of your sight.

Zidane stared at the curt message he had written on the parchment, his stomach tossing and turning. He pursed his lips before he left it at that, folding the note up and handing it to the courier. The man tipped his hat to Zidane before he began his descent down to the rail station below. Zidane watched his beret bob out of sight and he let out a long sigh. Gingerly, he touched his temple, again reviewing last night’s events. No matter how many times he ran through it, he simply couldn’t wrap his head around it. He didn’t want to. Arabella could never

become the apple of Kuja's eyes. She wasn't a puppet to be played with. He felt his own insides grow cold at the thought. A feeling of panic was nearly welling up in his stomach. He couldn't let Kuja do this. He wouldn't allow his own child to become his weapon. Zidane tried to tell himself it was all just to get to him. To torture him for what he did all those years again. And it was beginning to work as the thought of any harm coming to his daughter's was the only thing present on his mind.

"There you are," Zidane's head snapped over his shoulder to see Freya dressed in a velvet blue coat with the arms of Burmecia plaited on the chest. She looked to him with composed blue eyes concealed behind her silky ashen locks. "They were right. You really did get the lights beat out of you."

"Eh," Zidane touched his sore cheek. "Looks that bad, huh?"

"I'll just pretend the other person looks twice as bad," Freya teased in her cool manner. "Lunch is about to begin. Everyone is quite eager to see you."

"Is the Count of Reno there?" Zidane asked.

"Count Servino? Yes, of course," Freya nodded. "This War Committee concerns everyone."

“Oh, great,” Zidane heaved a sigh, walking with Freya back up the tall and numerous staircases. “He’s not concerned about the war. He’s just gonna talk my ear off about why his son should marry my daughter.” Freya chuckled as they turned a corner.

The princesses didn’t leave their room much that sunny day. They made appearances for meals and Alex went for a lonesome walk in search of fun, but there was none to be had. Even though most days Zidane was whisked away being a king, the castle was simply not the same without him. It lacked energy. It lacked love. The princesses lounged away in the sitting room between their chambers. Periodically, Steiner came by to see them, but they mostly were keeping to themselves. Alex arranged and rearranged her vibrant Tetra Master cards while Bella curled up on the couch and read anything to preoccupy her mind. Sarah sat on the floor near Alex, picking at her nail and pretending she was trying to read, too. The day had been a waste really. And the girl’s knew the next day and the day after would only be the same story. They were simply cooped up in a castle, all alone without their father, left to stew in their own thoughts. Each girl felt the

presence of world conflict differently and they found it hard to convey it to their sister's. They each dumbly glanced around the room occasionally when the silence pricked their ears again. It wasn't very often the king left the castle without his princesses.

A rap on the window caused every princess to jolt with startle. They were used to their door being knocked on, but the *window*? Bella gasped sharply as she sat up on the couch, gazing towards the large wall-length windows that overlooked the front of the Alexandrian garden. Sarah peaked her head around the couch and her eyes became as wide as saucers when she recognized Dante's tan face gazing through the clear pane. The brisk wind outside swept his shaggy brown hair everywhere. Sarah's cheeks began to burn and she hustled to her feet, lifting the window.

"Dante?" She asked, rather breathlessly. "What are you doing? And... how did you get up here?" Sarah furrowed her brow together as her sister's came to stand behind her.

"These ivy's are pretty strong," Dante told her. "Can I come in, though? It's cold up here!"

Quickly, the princesses parted and Dante scrambled over the ledge, shutting the chilly breeze

out behind him. His cheeks were windblown. He raked his fingers through his hair as he took his first warm breath inside of the chamber. He glanced around, never having been so far into the Alexandrian Castle. He then looked between the stunned girl's eyes.

"How did you know this was the right window?" Sarah asked.

"I didn't," Dante admitted, shaking his head. "Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if a maid reported me to your knights."

"We'll just hide you," Alex grinned, her cheeks rosy as usual.

"Dante, what are you doing here?" Sarah glanced anxiously towards the door, already counting on another hourly Steiner pop-in. "You could get in a lot of trouble. Especially because my father isn't here. The castle isn't supposed to be open to visitors."

"Well, they didn't seem that concerned," Dante grinned. "I just walked on in. But that's why I'm here." He pulled his backpack from his shoulder and looked to the princesses.

“Dante, are you here about what we talked about last night?” Sarah asked as if he fiddled in his bag. After a moment, he held a small silver dagger out towards Sarah. It was no where near the caliber she had seen her father train with before. It was a simple silver silver, rather short, with a hilt on it engraved to look like ivy leaves. Bella and Alex recoiled from the small weapon like it was poison. “Where did you get that?”

“I made it. For you,” Dante said, glancing to the glinting weapon laid flat in his palm. “I know it’s not much but... it’s a little more protection for you. You can attach it beneath a cloak—”

“Why does she need a weapon?” Bella asked, furrowing her brow. Her chin-length black locks brushed against the frame of her face. “Sarah, why did he make this for you?”

Sarah’s blue eyes were trained on the small dagger in Dante’s hands. Pensively, she licked her lips, her eyes not leaving the shiny silver. Finally, she looked to her dark haired sister. “We should learn to protect ourselves, shouldn’t we? Isn’t there a war looming?”

Alex got on her tip-toes to peer in Dante’s hands. “Wow, you made that?”

“He’s very talented,” Sarah said, making Dante blush madly.

A knock at their door made all the young people jump. Sarah gasped sharply, knowing Steiner was just on the other side. She gripped Dante’s shoulders, surging him forward towards a door. “Hide in my room!” She said.

“No, no, mine!” Alex jumped up and down. “Steiner will never suspect my room.”

“Get him out of here!” Bella ordered, leaping back towards the couch. Hurriedly, Sarah shuffled Dante into Alex’s room, promptly shutting the door. Quickly, the sister’s arranged themselves again. Sarah sank down with Alex on the ground, grabbing a random number of cards from her Tetra Master stack. The girl’s all drew their breath in as the door opened and again, meek Steiner entered. He looked tentatively between all the princesses, checking three off in his eyes. They hadn’t moved much from his last check in. Tentatively, they all gazed to Steiner.

“Is anyone hungry?” Steiner asked, trying to evade the awkward feeling creeping in on him. He was completely out of his element with both Beatrix and Zidane gone from the castle. He loved taking

care of and watching the girl's, but somehow it felt easier with Beatrix making her rounds through the castle. "Maybe someone wants to go for a walk?"

"That's okay, Steiner," Sarah shrugged, shifting through her assortment of cards. She was at an utter loss as to how to play the game. "I think we'll wait until dinner."

"Well, alright," Steiner said, looking around the room. "If you're certain... You can find me—"

"Yes, at the far east tower," Sarah looked to him. "We know where to find you, Steiner."

Steiner paused briefly before he nodded, closing the door behind him. He let out a long sigh. The east tower. He occupied it every day to look out over Alexandria. It happened to be the same tower he had seen Dagger leap from when evading Zidane on her own birthday all those years ago. It was hard for Steiner to remind himself the Queen was dead. Even after ten years, it was hard for Steiner to imagine he was living in a world without Dagger. It had been a decade and still, not a single day changed the fact that Steiner had to continue on without her. And every day he couldn't help but feel like he failed. As his armor clattered down the hallway, the feeling of

failure loomed even heavier over him. Everything he had nightmares about was happening again.

What was it all for, Your Majesty?

Zidane seated himself between Freya and Beatrix at the large and long chestnut table that gleamed in the afternoon light pouring in. There was shuffling and the low murmur of chatter that rose in the high vaulted ceilings of the conference room. Leaders and heroes alike found their seats with the confident and always regal Regent Cid at the head. Beside him sat the wiry Princess Eiko who had her purple locks contained in a fish-tail braid that ran down her back. Amarant sat across from her, his head tilted down in his reserved way. Quina found himself beside Count Servino of Treno and beside the Count draped in velvet purple fabrics, sat the thin and poised leader of Cleyra, a bishop named Aandin, whom Freya trusted very much. Fratley was on the other side of Freya and together, the esteemed knights represented Burmecia. Zidane looked up and down the table. He couldn't help but feel so out of place. And like a part of him was missing. Two chairs were always absent. Vivi and Dagger should have been there. He pursed his lips and fiddled with the grain of the table.

“My esteemed guests,” Regent Cid began with his husky voice. ‘I humbly welcome you to the Lindblum Castle, though, I do wish our meeting were in greater spirits. Now we have all gathered because we are not naïve to the trouble we see brewing again. It is times like this we must re-promise ourselves to the idea of peace, freedom, and righteousness and band together to help each other when most needed. In times like these, together, we must stand. Today, I feel we can all come as one with a solid plan. And we must hold strong, especially for Alexandria.’ Zidane felt a wave of eyes turn on his sorry bruised face. He couldn’t help but feel rather sheepish. *Aren’t I just one big chump?* Zidane scoffed in his mind. Regent Cid cleared his throat. “Someone correct me if I’m wrong, but I feel electing Zidane as the Head of this committee is in our best interest.”

“I agree,” Freya’s smooth, harminous voice rang out. “There’s nobody who knows these predicaments better than Zidane.”

Zidane pensively licked his cracked lips and looked around the quiet room. All eyes were on him like he was magically supposed to know what to do. In the moment, Zidane felt the least qualified to lead this committee. Seventeen years ago, Zidane had

less on the line. He had more elbow room to act first and think later. He was no longer the hero the tales boasted him to be. He didn't want to be that person anymore, anyway.

"King Zidane," Bishop Aandin spoke up, his voice smooth and calculated. "Perhaps you can start by telling us what you have learned?"

Zidane knew he needed to act. The stares were beginning to grow agitatedly concerned and pensive. Zidane tall-back chair scraped against the polished marble floors as he came to his feet. Regent Cid took this as his cue to seat himself. Of all the eyes at the table, Eiko's burned the most into the side of his face. He felt hot as he took the floor beneath all the nation's watchful eyes.

"A lot of questions about this war are still unanswered," Zidane began, certain his voice was going to falter. His head throbbed from his lumpy nap the night before. 'We still can't be sure of the magnitude or scale of the war. And we can't pinpoint exactly what the ultimate outcome is going to be. But there is one thing for certain.' Zidane pressed him palms to the cool rigid surface of the table, gazing up and down at his audience. "Kuja is alive. How? I don't know. Where? I'm not sure. Last

night, aboard my airship, I was attacked by someone who works for Kuja; a very sneaky, well-trained mage. In the last war, you may remember he used Black Mages. Those are still a factor at play in this war. They're Kuja's pawns. But it seems he's stepped his defenses up with human agents. They're deceptive and could be apart of any crowd without you being aware. Some of these agents may already be inside of your nation's." A murmer broke out between all the leaders, now. But they curtly hushed when Zidane remained standing, his face unmoving. "I was able to extract some information from the agent before she left. How much of it is true? I'm not totally sure, but it seemed familiar enough to work with for the time being. The Cycle of Souls has been restarted. Even with Terra's destruction and the fall of the Iifa Tree, there is still hope for Kuja to re-cycle these souls back to Gaia, to finish what Terra couldn't. And— they don't even need Terra this time to make it happen. Right now, they have one clear adjective to getting the upperhand on us."

Zidane fell into a silence, having a hard time bringing himself to say it. Beatrix watched her king, silently, unwanting to speak the words herself. "It's Eidolons, isn't it?" Eiko asked, lifting her chin.

“Kuja cannot tame them himself, but he’s powerful enough to project them.”

“No...” Zidane shook his head, rather grimly. Slowly, his darkened blue eyes gazed over Eiko and she felt a chill creep up her spine. “Kuja knows a ultimate weapon now. Part Genome, part Summoner, she’s the perfect oracle for Kuja. Princess Arabella Alexandros-Tribal.”

The room was still for a few beats before Eiko stamped her heel to the floor, coming to her feet. She clenched her fists. “What *bullshit*. That bastard, he really knows how—”

“Princess Eiko, please contain yourself,” Regent Cid said, folding his hands together.

“All those years ago, we were angry at Kuja because he wanted to mess with Zidane and Dagger,” Eiko burst out, nearly reverting back to her old dialect. “We should be *angrier* now and get on defense. Kuja wants a thirteen year old girl. Arabella barely knows the first thing about summoning. Kuja could kill her.”

“We don’t even know where he is,” Zidane countered. But he paused for a moment, recalling Fauna’s velvety words. Something dawned on him

in the next moment and his eyes intensely met the Princess of Lindblum's. "He's at the Iifa Tree, Eiko."

"What? How do you know?" Eiko shook her head. "It's probably withered away to nothing but a large crater now."

"No, that's not she told me," Zidane replied. Eiko straightened her shoulders and furrowed her brow. 'Kuja revitalized the Iifa Tree. He did that so he could use it to re-cycle the souls. She told me she was one of those souls Terra had kept there for safe keeping. That would explain why it was raining in Madain Sari.' Zidane shook his head. "Kuja was nursing it back to health."

"This is absurd..." Eiko whispered, seemingly bewildered by what she was being told.

"So, we should head for the Iifa Tree," Regent Cid nodded.

"We can't simply show up," Freya shook her head, glancing to Sir Fratley whose face was contorted in opposition. "We're ill prepared. We know it's Kuja, but we don't know what we're up against. We could be ambushed."

Beatrix came to her fee beside Zidane now, her curly brown locks bouncing on her shoulders. “The Alexandrian Castle’s first and foremost primary goal is the protection and security of Princess Arabella.”

“Yes, yes,” Regent Cid agreed, lifting his hand. “The rest of the nation’s should prepare fortifications for their town. They should also in state drafts within their town walls and begin training for field battle. In the meantime, to stall things, Princess Arabella must be dealt with.”

“Princess Arabella should come here to the Lindblum Castle,” Eiko declared. “She will be safest here with our airship brigade.”

“Burmecia may be better,” Sir Fratley offered. “The least suspecting and we have many underground cellars we could covert to a living space for the young girl.”

“I don’t want Arabella separated from her sister’s,” Zidane told them, looking around the table.

“A grave mistake, Your Majesty,” Amaran finally spoke in his gruff voice, his eyes piercing out from beneath his mop of red hair. “You want them separated. They’ll be sittin’ ducks together. One little swoop and your entire bloodline is ended.”

“Amarant!” Eiko shot him eyes of daggers. Zidane tensed at his words.

“The Alexandrian Castle is more than equipped,” Beatrix said, more as a means to comfort Zidane. But her eyes looked towards the nation’s earnestly. “We have always foreseen conditions such as these. In the good times, you prepare for the bad. We have safe places for the princesses. We needn’t concern ourselves with transporting the princesses anywhere. Like Zidane said, the agents fit in in normal society. They could be spotted and tracked.”

“The only thing preventing this world from being overtaken is Arabella,” Eiko pushed, looking around the table. “She needs constant supervision. She should continually move around the continent as to keep Kuja at bay. Keeping her in one place for too long is dangerous.”

“This is *my* daughter and I want her at *my* castle,” Zidane was quick to reply, his body temperature elevating. Of course, of all people to butt heads with, it is Eiko. “I’m not going to have her separated from what she knows, constantly on the run like a wild animal being hunted. That’s not the way I’m going to treat this, Eiko.”

“It might not be ideal,” Eiko shook her head, her plaited hair beating against her back. “But if we can keep Arabella out of Kuja’s hands, we’ll still have a chance of stopping him again, Zidane.”

“How could we coordinate all those safe houses?” Zidane asked, holding his hands out. “How can we really trust everyone is on our side? In a way, it would be like dropping her off right at Kuja’s doorstep. It’s out of our element, we can’t do it.”

“She shall go with me,” Eiko told him. “I know of places. I know people, Zidane, who were part of the same resistance that rallied our sides in the first war. She is my mentee. She should stay with me. Amarant is right, in a way... we can’t have the girl’s all sequestered together. It’s unwise.”

“I’m her father and I want her with me.”

“Perhaps,” Freya came to her feet. “We should all take a brief break to get some fresh air, perhaps something to drink? We can revisit the topic at another time.”

Zidane and Eiko held a tense eye contact with each other across the room, directly through Freya. But the conference room came alive with noise as the heroes and leaders stood, looking to each other

with solemn and bewildered gazes. What was the world coming to?

Zidane found himself at the highest balcony perched atop the Lindblum Castle. Absent mindedly as he climbed the cobblestone stairs, he brushed his hands along the wildly climbing ivy. He came to pause before a somewhat rusty and clunky telescope. The cool autumn breeze brushed through Zidane's hair as he gazed out towards the distance. He dug his hands in his pockets, taking solace in the silence. Just beyond that mountain range was his home, where his girl's were. He wondered what they were doing, if they were behaving for Steiner. He imagined they were gravely worried, but hoped it hadn't sapped all the energy from them. He wanted nothing more than to transport himself through that mountain range.

“I knew I’d find you up here.”

Zidane pursed his lips, holding in a groan as Eiko came up the stairs to stand beside him. The breeze carried her braid as she approached the telescope, running her hands along the flaking finish. Eiko took a moment to look out towards the clear plains before

them. The thin snaking rivers glinted at them in the bright overhead sunlight. The air smelled of honey and roasted nuts with the approaching cold season. Eiko glanced to Zidane, who looked on edge. The sunlight accentuated the wounds he had sustained from the night before. His eyebrow and lips were already crusting with scabs and his cheekbone was purple and blue. She knew his concern was well-founded.

Eiko let out a sigh, hunching her shoulders. “Well, there I go again, being that thorn in your side.”

Zidane was quiet for a few beats, scuffing his boots against the stone. Finally, his tired eyes turned on the impatiently waiting princess. “Look,” Zidane licked his lips. “I know you’re trying to help. And I know you want what’s best for my girl’s. But... I have to have control of some things, Eiko. And my daughter’s is at the top of that list. I can’t send Arabella away from me, out of my sight, for even a day.”

Eiko pressed her palms to the telescope between them. “But Kuja is going to know to come after to you to find Arabella. She’s a sitting duck in Alexandria.”

“That’s why I should return to Alexandria tomorrow,” Zidane said. “I need to mobilize my soldiers and lock the castle down.”

“Do you think it will be enough?” Eiko asked, leaning forward.

Zidane studied her face for a moment before pursing his lips. “I gotta hope so for the time being. Until we can get onto Kuja’s trails and find the plug. Maybe my friendly neighbors in Lindblum can provide some air security?”

Eiko grinned, coming around the telescope now to stand in front of Zidane. “You know I’d do whatever it took to protect you and the princesses, right?” Eiko clasped her hands together in front of her. “I know I’m still that hot-headed immature brat you always saw, Zidane. And I know sometimes I speak out of line or make ridiculous requests of you, but it’s only because I truly care about you. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you, Zidane. And I’m gravely worried that this time... something will.”

“I’ll be—”

“Please, don’t say that,” Eiko shook her head, looking to him with great concern. Zidane arched his

eyebrows. “I saw how reckless you could be last time, Zidane. You would have let your head get chopped off if it meant one of us kept a finger. I simply cannot imagine what you would do for your daughter’s.”

Zidane glanced out at the landscape unfurling around them before looking to Eiko with soft eyes. “We don’t know what’s going to happen, Eiko. Or how bad it will really get.”

Eiko’s blue eyes gazed at him intensely. “Zidane... Kuja will kill you to get to Arabella. He’s not playing games with you anymore. He doesn’t need you.”

“Yeah, well,” Zidane shrugged. He was at an utter loss for words. “I’m no stranger to danger, am I?”

Eiko reached forward, grabbing hold of his coat. She gave him a gentle tug. “I can’t lose you, Zidane.” The beginning mists of tears came to the corner of her eyes. Instinctively, Zidane gripped her arms, gazing down at the flustered princess with a furrowed brow.

“Hey, Eiko... what’s this about? What’s going on?” Zidane asked.

Eiko's cheeks became a rosy red as the tears surfaced more in her eyes. "I sometimes worry... that we can't do this again, Zidane. And I know, I can't think like that, especially when so many people are counting on us, but I can't help but think this will all go terribly wrong and it... pains me to even think about a future on the other side of this. It could be a world without you, Zidane."

Zidane gripped Eiko's shoulders. "It's too soon to be thinkin' about whose graves we're going to be digging. I'm the last person you should be concerned about."

Eiko sniffled. "But you're the most important person to me, Zidane. I... I love you."

Zidane felt his body temperature rise and he gazed down on the flummoxed princess. He squeezed her shoulders, shaking his head. "That's crazy talk, Eiko. I'm going to be fine. We're going to be fine. I'm not gonna die on you, alright?"

Eiko furiously rubbed at her tears. "Okay... we should probably get back to the conference room now that this is settled." She turned her back on Zidane, tensely descending the stairs. Zidane scuffed his boot awkwardly against the stone again, jamming his hands in his trouser pockets.

“Hey, Eiko...” He said, stopping her in the middle of the platform. Curiously, with a red face, she looked over her shoulder at Zidane. “How ‘bout after the war... you finally pick one of the dozens of suitors lined up for you?”

After a moment, Eiko grinned. “You really just don’t get it, huh?”

As the evening sun began to descend across the Lindblum, the tired leaders and heroes finally retired from the conference room. They separated many different ways to find comfort in books and naps. Servino captured many with an invitation to rooftop wine drinking. Beatrix watched as Zidane marched through the idle banter of his companions, disappearing around the hall. She knew he was anxious and wound up. He was probably heading back to his room to promptly pack up. Beatrix politely wrapped her conversation with Sir Fratley about trench tactics up and decided to chase after Zidane, since she knew he was probably upset.

Though she was relieved to hear Zidane was as eager as she was to return to Alexandria, she worried it was perhaps premature. Fine details needed to be

smoothed out in regards to war lines and soldier footpaths. As a war general of nearly three decades, Beatrix knew a war of this magnitude required calculated plans and the most equal balance of work between all the nation's. And she wasn't entirely finished hearing the other leader's offers on ways to shelter Bella. Though Beatrix wanted to support Zidane, a gut wrenching instinct was instructing her to make plans for the child. They couldn't wait until someone was simply trying to pry her from their hands.

After climbing the stairs, Beatrix began down a narrow corridor with many doors on either side. Zidane's was near the back, right across from her's. In her mind, she began elaborately preparing a speech. One in which she could appeal to Zidane emotionally, yet logically. A voice of reason, she wanted to call it. The grim reality that was setting in on her had her mind constantly drifting back to Steiner. She wouldn't be able to stop him from getting involved. It's his sworn duty and his right. And Beatrix knew Steiner had every reason to unsheathe his sword.

Just behind Beatrix, one of the bedroom doors burst open, slamming directly into the wall. Beatrix became alert and swung backwards, pulling her ruby

incrusted sword from her hip in one deft swoop. She tilted backwards on the balls of her feet as she drew her sword directly to the neck of a slender cloaked figure. Beatrix gave the stranger a hard look, her sword never lowering. But the cloaked figure was quick, dropping to a kneel and swinging their leg out. Beatrix felt her feet come out beneath her and she cursed as she fell against the wall, her sword clattering beside her. Quickly, Beatrix reared her foot down, causing a shriek to rise from the figure. Beatrix pressed with all her might against the wrist as it fell just inches short of her sword. Beatrix swooped her weapon up, pressing the tip to the base of the stranger's skull.

“Nobody touches my sword,” Beatrix whispered sharply. ‘We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Who are you?’ There was a silence for a few beats and Beatrix sighed, releasing her foot from the wrist that surely was broken. The intruder let out a sigh of pain, but kept their eyes lowered. Beatrix now pressed her boot directly into her back, keeping her sword against the neck. “Remove your hood.” The person beneath her began to wriggle and Beatrix pushed more weight against them. The cloaked figure swung their arm backwards, using their sharp elbow to hit Beatrix in her knee. She staggered

backwards, her leg searing. The intruder leapt towards Beatrix and they struggled against each other into a wall, knocking art work and candles down. Hands came around Beatrix's neck and she pressed herself against the wall to catch a breath, craning her neck upwards. Beatrix reared her knee up, landing a direct hit into the cloaked beings stomach. Beatrix shoved them across the hall, letting out a choked cough as she scrambled to pin them against the wall. One touch of their broken wrist had them howling and Beatrix had no problem containing them.

"Beatrix!" Zidane appeared from running up the hall. "What the hell is—" He stopped when he saw the cloaked figure in Beatrix's grasp. They began to struggle harder upon Zidane's entry in the scene. The king lunged forward and ripped the cloak backwards, revealing Fauna once more.

"Is this the person who attacked you?" Beatrix asked, giving her wrist a squeeze. Fauna ground her teeth together, pressing her flushed face to the wall. Zidane nodded. Beatrix looked towards Zidane. "I guess this is an interesting turn of events."

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, looking towards Fauna with a piercing look. "Can't get me

out of your mind, huh? You just had to follow me to Lindblum.” Zidane shifted the weight between his boots. “Take her to the infirmary. Make sure she’s chained up, too.”

It was growing late into the night and Zidane began to wonder if he’d ever get a full night’s rest again. Outside the infirmary door, Zidane met with Beatrix, Eiko, and Freya. They all seemed rather tense, glancing towards the closed door as if expecting Fauna to burst out at any moment. The milky moonlight bled through the tall windows of the hallway, drenching the heroes in a porcelain glow.

“She’s extremely powerful from what I can tell,” Eiko was saying, looking between everyone. Her eye’s lingered at Zidane who ruminated in his fears and exhaustion. His eyes were dark and his face was pale. He hadn’t been looking well and healthy for quite some time now. “It was a good move breaking her wrist, Beatrix. It seems that causes a disruption in her casting abilities.”

“A weak spot... that’s good,” Freya nodded. “They may be powerful, but they have the same

limitations as us.”

“She’s still only human,” Beatrix said.

“A human with a *Terran* soul in her,” Eiko countered. “We still aren’t completely sure what she’s capable of.”

Slowly, Zidane’s eyes shifted towards the moons and stars in the sky. He shuddered at the idea of the doom that awaited them. As they stood in that small circle, he couldn’t but feel frightened of what was happening. Pensively, he licked his lips, keeping his eyes directed up. “I wonder what the real Fauna was like... before Kuja stole her body for his own uses. What was her Gaian soul like?”

“Now’s not the time to wonder,” Freya shook her head. “We cannot get muddled in details or feelings, Zidane. She is a threat and she must be contained.”

Zidane looked between each woman in the group with him, studying their faces that were stone-hard and tired just like his own. He pursed his lips. “Don’t I have the same Terran soul she does?” Everyone in the group was silent for a few beats.

“We should all go to bed,” Beatrix eventually said. “We’re tired and overworked. A good night’s rest will do us well.” The group agreed and Beatrix

and Freya broke away, disappearing into the dimly lit hallways, their boots thudding away. Zidane watched the infirmary door for a moment before he began his own walk back to his chambers. But Eiko's quiet voice reached out to him in the darkness and he turned towards the slender girl. The moonlight poured over her silky hair and her bright blue eyes glowed.

"You know this is different, right?"

"What is?" Zidane asked, blandly.

Eiko hugged herself, holding in a sigh. "You and Fauna... you're different. Just like you're different from Kuja. Maybe your souls come from a similar origin but... you're not like them, Zidane."

"Yeah, I know," Zidane's blond locks bounced as he nodded his head, casting his eyes down to the thick running carpets. 'Sometimes I wonder, though... how long can I run away from the fate that brought me here? How long can I ward off my origins and stop it from taking away everything I know and love? How do I stop Kuja from ever laying a hand on Arabella? It was different when he wanted me, Eiko.' The two were quiet for a moment. Zidane heaved a sigh, hunching his shoulders. "I'm no different from them, afterall, Eiko. All I bring is

misery and destruction. Just like they do.” And with that, the king turned and disappeared into the shrouded hallway, leaving a silent Eiko behind.

16. Long Live the Queen

Chapter Sixteen

The small cabin was quieter than usual. The curtains had been pushed back to allow the early morning sun to bleed through the square panes. Steiner found himself sitting alone at the kitchen table. His mug of coffee had warm steam rising from it as his eyes were trained directly to a piece of parchment laid flat in front of him. The silence of the cabin stung his ears acutely. Typically, Beatrix would be making a ruckus to cook them a simple breakfast. But since she had left, Steiner found no inspiration to feed himself anything besides coffee. Nights without Beatrix were difficult. How he missed her quiet breathing beside him. He ached thinking about rolling over in bed to find nothing but a cold spot beside him. He missed having to impatiently wait outside the bathroom to pee while she carefully combed her curls and applied the most meager of powder to her rounded cheeks. Without Beatrix home, the captain was an absolute shell of a man.

However, that turbulence had fallen to the way side as he stared at a new unsettling feeling unfurled before him on the small kitchen table. It was Zidane's familiar writing. Not quite refined, but decent enough to be easily read. It was so curt and obviously hurriedly written. There was not much information besides the importance placed on Arabella. Steiner, unfortunately, knew all too well the trouble that would await them. Steiner pensively drank his coffee, his mind wandering towards the middle child. No doubt Kuja was intrigued by the young girl. But Zidane's message could only make Steiner worry that perhaps there was more danger following in the footsteps of Arabella. That maybe, just maybe, the evils that lurked after them were much more refined and brutal than what they once knew.

Steiner sighed, the steam of his coffee dispersing from his breath. He came to his feet and his armor rattled as he went to gaze out the window. The morning was promising that it was going to be another beautiful day. How could the world be so pretty, yet etched with such horrors and sadness? Why did so many have to suffer when there seemed to be so much wonderfulness to capture on Gaia? Steiner pursed his lips as he heard the beginning

tweets of birds. He closed his eyes for a moment and simply listened to the sounds of the world as it came alive for another day.

“Beatrix...” He whispered, nearly longingly. “I need you here with me. Please, come home.”

The tweeting birds began to swirl into Sarah’s ears. Groggily, she turned her head against the pillow, scrunching her eyes up. The sun was invading her room much too brightly. She wondered who had drawn her curtains. She let out a long sigh, wishing she could fall back asleep. She kept her eyes and her face pressed into the pillow as she listened to the birds. They sounded so jubilant and excited about the morning. They also sounded utterly close. Sarah lifted her head now and looked over her shoulder. Her stomach nearly plummeted to her feet when she realized Dante was sitting on her window sill, leaning out into the fresh morning breeze. The movement of the princess caught his attention and he gazed towards her with a grin. Sarah sat up straight now, holding her covers close to her. She realized in that moment her unwashed face and tangly hair was quite the awful sight.

“Dante, what are you doing in here?!” Sarah asked, shaking her head. “You scaled the wall again? You’re in big trouble if someone finds you!”

“I’m not worried,” Dante’s smile never wavered. His tanned skin gleamed in the pink morning light as he looked back out the window. “It would definitely be worth it for a view like this. You can see all the way to the mountains from here. It’s amazing. I can’t even see over the town wall’s from my roof.”

Sarah quickly reached for her robe and pulled it around her wiry body. She hugged herself and turned back to the boy. “What brings you here so early? And... to my chambers?”

Dante set his feet up on the sill and hugged his knees. His brown hair clawed across his forehead and he pursed his lips. “I hate to talk politics so early in the morning but... I’m here to show you how to fight more. Your sister’s aren’t interested and... maybe that’s for the best.” Dante came to his feet now, looking at the meek Sarah. “But you’re the next in line to the throne, Sarah. Someone could be coming after you. And you showed promise with your dagger work yesterday. Today, I brought you this.” He knelt down to a duffel bag he had pushed against the wall. Slowly, Sarah came towards him

with arched eyebrows. Dante stood again, a long silver sword in his hand. It glinted in the early morning light. At the hilt, it was extravagantly carved to portray thorny rose vines and encrusted just at the base of the sword was a glimmering garnet. Sarah's eyes widened as he placed it into her hands.

It was cool to the touch and was heavier than Sarah anticipated. Her eyes hovered over the garnet that stared right back at her. Finally, she looked to Dante. "You... made this for me?"

"I did," Dante nodded. "General Beatrix has always used a very well-regarded sword, encrusted with rubies, and razor sharp. The Save the Queen is one of the most infamous swords on the Mist Continent. It only seemed fitting the heir to the throne had one of her own. I dub this one Long Live the Queen."

Sarah walked a few paces with the sword at her side, her barefeet pressing against the cold marble. After a moment, she held the sword up in front of her, admiring the fine details and sharp edges. Again, her eyes sank to the garnet. Sarah looked over her shoulder at Dante, her cheeks rosy and

warm. “Long Live the Queen,” Sarah whispered, her lips barely moving.

When Zidane arrived at the Lindblum Castle Infirmary that morning, he looked towards the door on the far wall. Just on the other side, Fauna was lying chained under constant surveillance. Zidane turned the other direction, however, and let himself into a different door, where he found Mikoto all alone in a quiet but clean room. The curtains had been pinned backwards. Mikoto seemed to be doing well. She was propped up in bed and some color had returned to her face. Her long blonde hair had been washed thoroughly and braided by some kind maids. It fell in a thick plait over her wiry shoulder. Her big blue eyes were trained on the window, but the sound of Zidane entering caught her attention.

“Hey,” Zidane said, quietly closing the door behind him. “You’re up early.”

“The same could be said of you,” Mikoto’s voice was so harmonious and smooth. Though she had spent the last seventeen years of her life learning how to be an emotive human being, she still hadn’t quite perfected finding a rhythm to her voice.

Zidane came to seat himself beside the bed on a small wooden stool. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” Mikoto told him. ‘The doctor’s said I lost a lot of blood. But... I should make a recovery.’ She was quiet for a moment, studying his face in the bright morning light. “You’ve come to ask me about something, haven’t you?”

Zidane heaved a sigh, hunching his shoulders. “I was going to return to Alexandria today, but I’ve chosen not to. You were right, Mikoto. Kuja *is* alive and we have one of his agents chained up in the room next door.” Zidane cast his eyes down for a moment. ‘But... I did have one question.’ He paused for a moment, thinking long and hard about his words. Finally, he looked back to the patiently waiting Mikoto, whose composed face never faltered. “My daughter had a nightmare the other night... Kuja came to her, speaking in all his normal fancy mumbo-jumbo. He wants her, Mikoto. Has he come to you?”

“Kuja has been in my dreams, too,” Mikoto replied. Zidane’s eyes widened. “He has not been in yours?”

Zidane lowered his head for a moment, running his hands together. “I... I haven’t dreamt since

Dagger died.”

“Arabella is special to Kuja,” Mikoto looked straight ahead. “Much more special than Brahne or Garnet could have ever been. In a way... he cares about her.”

“No,” Zidane stood up now, shaking his head. “That’s not acceptable, Mikoto. And you, of all people, can’t believe that. The only thing Kuja cares about is using Arabella for his own gain. He doesn’t care if she lives or dies.”

“How can we defy him?” Mikoto looked towards Zidane, her eyes saying nothing at all. “Kuja is unstoppable, Zidane. If we couldn’t put an end to him seventeen years ago, what difference will we make now? We could use Arabella to our advantage.”

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, his face pensive. “If you’re suggesting using her as bait, it’s out of the question.”

“We have to make Kuja show himself,” Mikoto told him. “How can we put a stop to the madness against an invisible force, Zidane? We can slash down so many agents, but there will always be more. Kuja will re-cycle soul after soul and sick

them after us. If we let him sit comfy in his little hide out, all we'll be doing is running in circles. We can't stop all of the souls. We'd be outnumbered, even with the nation's united."

"Even if we put Arabella right out into the open, how can we be sure Kuja will be the one who actually comes for her?" Zidane held his arms out at his side. "It's too much of a gamble, Mikoto. That agent we captured attacked me thinking I would be Arabella. She wanted to inject this gel into her."

"Gel?" Mikoto's body stopped moving and she gazed towards Zidane with wide open eyes. "What kind of gel?"

"I dunno," Zidane shrugged. 'It was just some clear gel she had in a needle. She didn't stick me with it.' He studied her still face for a moment. "Do you know something about this gel?"

"A clear gel..." Mikoto spoke quietly, casting her eyes down. Her dark lashes batted in the morning light. "Garland had something that fit that description. He never used it on me. But he would on his... other experiments. He would stick a syringe in those who weren't ready yet. Just a tiny prick in the neck. As far as I could tell, it simply induced a coma. But beyond that... I'm not sure."

Zidane sighed and paced towards the window, his hands on his hips. It was such a beautiful morning with promise of a cool autumn day. But it was all lost on him. Kuja had been lying in wait for quite some time. And he seemed to be using it effectively. Despite the languid man's hate and disdain for Garland, he seemed to have no problem using his studies and technologies to his advantage. He had been waiting for these moments to find the weak spots, to trickle back in like the panic that was slowly overtaking Zidane's mind. He blinked, his mind running absolutely blank as he gazed out the window.

Eventually, he looked back over his shoulder at Mikoto. "So, say we do get Kuja to make an appearance. Then what? A slap on the wrist isn't going to do anything. We sure as hell won't be able to talk anything out."

"If Kuja appears, Zidane..." Mikoto was quiet for a moment. "It will be complete and utter war. He will stop at nothing to get what he wants. But maybe... there's a way to convince him that Arabella isn't what he wants."

Curiously, Zidane turned towards Mikoto, arching his eyebrows.

The early afternoon air was crisp and taxingly cold. Sarah's breath puffed before her as she and Dante occupied a lonely corner of the garden that was not often patrolled. It was cornered in by the tall granite walls of the castle property and bordered off by a wide section of the river that the gondolas did not travel through. Sarah had dressed warmly, opting for a long sleeve cotton tunic and pleated black pants. This portion of her wardrobe was rarely accessed. Her father only had them tailored for practice emergency drills, though Sarah found the thought rather useless. When would she be wearing pants during an actual emergency? Her wavy blonde hair had been swept back into a messy ponytail at the crown of her head. Together, she and Dante stood face to face and he slowly went through the motions of sword play. Down and up, parry, and strike. Stun and defend. Momentum and footwork. Dante seemed to be well-versed in the sword.

Sarah would practice for Dante sometimes. He would walk around her as she struck the forms and motions of the moves. He reminded her what to do with her free hand and prompted her to keep light on her feet. Sarah skipped back and forth, growing more and more accustomed to the weight of the

silver sword. They tried simply sparring, but at first, it was much to easy to disarm Sarah. She would watch in bewilderment as her sword clattered across the cobblestone, running up into the brush. And so she would practice again, keeping in mind to grip her sword tightly and anticipate the weight of her attacker. A spar later in the morning had her backed against the prickly brush and so she practiced again, spinning and acting light of her feet, slashing her shimmering sword through the air, and keeping in mind her surroundings. As it reached noon, Dante and Sarah lined up to spar again.

“I know there’s a lot to keep in mind,” Dante told her as the princess took a moment to catch her breath and roll her shoulders. ‘But you’re gettin’ the hang of it. This is why I wanted you to practice with the sword. It’s much different than just slashin’ a dagger.’ Sarah parted her feet, bringing her sword up. Slowly, Dante copied and the two gazed at each other as the birds tweeted overhead. “Are you ready?” Dante asked, looking to her from beneath his bangs.

“A real opponent wouldn’t ask me that.”

Dante smirked fleetingly before he made the first move, bringing his sword up. Sarah deftly met him

and bent her knees, sliding her blade along his. She was able to drive him sideways and stumble forward, using her shoulder to make him stagger. In the next moment she parried, but Dante's steel met hers, surprisingly. He took her moment of shock to counter with his elbow, but he was astounded when Sarah easily slid out from his move, bringing the hilt of her sword against his arm. Dante stumbled a few paces from Sarah, holding his elbow. He looked towards the readied princess, who was still in position, holding her freshly polished sword in her hands. Dante couldn't help but think, despite being a sheltered heir her entire life, she had the fighting in her. It was as if the lore of the Hero of Eight was trickling through her blood with an unyielding desire to learn.

Their spar was about to resume when just a few hedges over a familiar voice had Sarah freezing. "You there! Raagen! Have you seen Princess Sarah?"

"That's Steiner!" Sarah jolted across the patio, falling in front of a large duffel bag. Hurriedly, she stuffed her sword into it and in one deft swoop, pulled out a long cloak, tying it around her neck. "Dante, you have to get out of here. Steiner will have your head if he knew you snuck in here!"

Dante relaxed from his fighting position and smirked as Sarah hurriedly hauled the bag over her shoulder, tucking it beneath the rather voluminous cloak for stealthiness. “I kind of like the thrill,” He told her. He looked over his shoulder, however, when he heard the clattering of armor.

“Dante, really,” Sarah came to him, gripping his wrist. “You have to disappear right now.”

“Alright, alright,” Dante sheathed his sword. “Good work today. I really think—”

“You can shower me with praise another time,” Sarah began to tow him towards the bushes. “You have to go now, though.”

Dante reached towards the bushes, parting the curling leaves that were growing crunchy from the approaching winter. He took one more moment to look at her bright angelic face. Daringly, he swooped in, pressing a warm kiss to her lips. It took Sarah by surprise and he disappeared quickly, crunching through the leaves. She heard him emerge into the next aisle and the thuds of his boots faded away. Quickly, Sarah went and seated herself on the bank of the river, being sure to huddle to mask the lump of her duffel bag. She tried to untense as she watched the river course by.

“Princess Sarah!” Came Steiner’s relieved voice just a moment later. Sarah could almost exhale at the thought of Dante getting away in the nick of time. “There you are. Lunch is about to start. It’s rather chilly outside. You should come in before you get ill.”

“That’s why I wore my cloak,” Sarah stood, almost robotically. Tensely, she held the cloak shut and turned towards the Captain. She was glad, in many ways, she was not confronted with Beatrix. The general was much more privy to social cues than Steiner was. “But you’re right, Steiner. I should go inside. I’ll go to my room and put something warmer on.”

Steiner watched the slender girl cross the clearing, his hands clasped behind his back. “Princess Sarah,” He called after her and she abruptly halted, looking over her shoulder. Her heart thundered furiously in her chest. She hoped the duffel bag wasn’t too noticeable, but she gazed towards Steiner with the most innocent of blue eyes. “You’ve been spending a lot of time outside since your father left. Is everything alright?”

Sarah gripped her cloak tightly as she turned towards the curious captain. “I’m fine, yes. I

suppose being inside the castle is just... different without Daddy home. I hope everything is alright in Lindblum.”

Steiner grinned weakly. “I understand. Go ahead and change. Lunch will be ready shortly.”

Sarah didn’t need to be told twice. Immediately, her legs carried her through the winding garden that she knew like the back of her hand. She picked up her pace, staying out from the eyes of the guards making their rounds. Her duffel bag beat against her hip as Sarah powered through the large oak doors of the castle and began her journey up the numerous staircases. When she entered the sitting chambers of the princess, both Bella and Alex were found there. They gazed towards their sister as she pushed her cloak back, revealing the gear dangling from her shoulders.

“Where have you been?” Bella asked, looking up from her book.

“Out in the garden,” Sarah replied, pulling her wavy blonde hair free of its ponytail. Her hair cascaded down her back and she ran her fingers through it, heading for her bedroom. “Steiner says lunch is almost ready. I’ll meet you two down there.”

Curious little Alex, however, was already hot on Sarah's heels, her tail wiggling behind her. "What's in the bag?"

"Nothing of interest," Sarah paused, her hand resting on the handle to her chamber.

"Looks pretty interesting," Alex arched her eyebrows, making her older sister sigh.

"If I show you, you have to promise not to open your big mouth."

"When have I ever!?" Alex threw her hands out at her side.

"You're joking, right?" Bella came to her feet now. "You blabbed to Daddy that one time I was trying to turn an oglop into a chocobo."

"And you told Daddy about the time I was trying Mother's earrings on," Sarah recounted.

"Or that time you told Daddy I was writing in a Lord Avon book."

"Oh, and remember when I was trying to learn to sew and you told Daddy I was ruining your clothes — you know, the dresses you had *outgrown*?"

“Don’t forget you told him about how I wasn’t going to bed on time.”

“Okay, okay,” Alex looked between her sister’s. “I was young and dumb. I’m older now. In fact, I’m such a refined princess that I know when to keep my mouth shut!”

“This is *serious*, Alex,” Sarah told her.

“I know,” Alex almost rolled her eyes. “Everything always is.”

After a moment of hesitation, Sarah slumped the bag to the ground. Together, all three princesses stood in a circle, staring at the bag that begged to be unzipped. Sarah gnawed on her lip, however, unable to gauge how her sister’s would truly react. Finally, she knelt down and drew the zipper back, lifting her freshly polished sword into the light. Her eyes hovered on the embedded garnet at the hilt. There was a silence as Bella and Alex soaked in what had been presented to them.

“Where did you get that?” Bella asked, furrowing her bold brow. “Did you *steal* that from Beatrix’s quarters?”

“No, of course not,” Sarah shook her head. Her grip tightened on the hilt. “It’s mine.”

“It looks exactly like something Beatrix would own,” Bella inspected the sword closely.

“Dante made it for me. It’s almost like a replica of Beatrix’s sword. He dubbed it ‘Long Live the Queen’.”

“Is that... a garnet?” Alex’s small hands came up to feel the facets of the gem. Sarah nodded. “Why did he make this for you? You’re not... going to use it, are you?” Alex seemed uneasy at the thought.

Sarah cradled the sword in her arms, looking over Dante’s intricate work. She could tell he took great care when forging it, not skipping over a single detail. *A sword defines an opponent. It’s a representation of what you’re fighting for.* Sarah pursed her lips for a moment. “If it comes down to it... it’s better I’m prepared, right?”

“Prepared for what?” Alex asked.

“War,” Sarah told her, quite bluntly. “Alex, the world is changing. And it doesn’t look like it’s in our favor. You saw Mikoto... how badly wounded she was... What if someone came to the castle looking to hurt one of us? With Beatrix and Daddy away, we have to protect ourselves.”

“You know Daddy will never be okay with this,” Bella crossed her arms over her chest.

Sarah’s bright eyes lifted to look between her sister’s. “That’s why neither of you will utter a word, do you understand? What Daddy doesn’t know, won’t hurt him. This is important to me.” Sarah stood up, holding the sword confidently at her side. “One day, I’m going to be Queen of this kingdom. What kind of Queen would I be if I couldn’t defend myself? I have to be brave, like Mother was, and like Daddy is. I have to protect what’s dear to me.”

There was a curt rap at the chamber door and the princesses were startled. Steiner’s voice drifted through from the other side. “Princesses, lunch has been served!”

Sarah looked back to Bella and Alex. “Not a word,” She whispered, carefully lying the sword back into the bag.

The conference room at the Lindblum Castle was sparsely occupied that early afternoon. Mikoto occupied one chair, a plush pillow placed behind her. She was still quite pale and obviously in

recovery, but she insisted on getting out of bed. Beatrix, Zidane, Regent Cid, Freya, and Eiko all found their own seats. At first, there was silence. Zidane's hands fidgeted together as he pursed his lips. He felt Beatrix's hand come to rest on his tense arm and he glanced towards her. The war general's eyes pierced his and he stopped squirming in his seat, swallowing his anxiety.

"So... what's this plan you were talkin' about?" Zidane finally asked, looking across the table at Mikoto.

"I actually cannot take credit for it," Mikoto replied with her calm and even voice. "The plan is that of Princess Eiko's. She visited me last night to convince me of it."

Zidane cocked his head towards Eiko, who was poised and calculated, as usual. Hearing it was her plan didn't evoke much trust from Zidane, but he watched her coolly, simply waiting for her to speak. Eiko came to her feet, her velvet buttercup yellow dress waving back and forth. She clasped her hands together and looked around the rather empty conference table.

"As we know, Kuja has but one desire. And that is to take Princess Arabella away for his own gain,"

The very words had Zidane tensing again, not even wanting to consider what would happen if Kuja had his wish. “My plan is one of deception.”

“Deception?” Freya echoed, sitting up straight in her chair. “You think we can *deceive* Kuja?”

“We may be able to,” Eiko nodded in confirmation. ‘His eyes are set on Arabella by one fact alone— that she is a new generation of the Summoners— and he believes she holds a key to total utter destruction. In some ways, he may be right. Kuja may like to believe he knows what he’s doing with these powers. He certainly knew his way around extraction all those years ago,’ She paused, as if reliving the memories of Mount Gulug and its freezing temperatures. “But one fact remains: Kuja is not a Summoner and there are things non-Summoners could never understand.”

“What are you suggesting?” Zidane’s eyes darted between Mikoto and Eiko.

“Arabella lacks the horn of the Summoners,” Eiko told him. “Because, in many ways, Arabella is not a full-blooded Summoner, this may be a fact we can play to our advantage. Kuja saw for himself that Arabella was able to call forth a summon. *But* we can prove to him she is unable to communicate with

the summons, therefore rendering his want of her useless. If she's unable to perform the basic tasks of a Summoner, he will have no reason to control her. Being half-Genome isn't enough for Kuja to wield the power of unleashing Terra through Arabella alone."

Zidane stood now, too. "Fauna told me she is perfect, though, being half-Summoner, half-Genome. Kuja doesn't want her strictly for her powers, but instead for her genetic make up."

"Convincing Kuja she is unable to be an affective Summoner, may be reason enough for him to take his sights off her," Eiko countered.

"I don't like this plan," Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. "It's a bunch of what if's, Eiko. And how exactly are we going to convince Kuja of this? What, are we gonna invite him over for some tea and cake and a little chat? Just because she doesn't have a horn isn't enough reason to convince Kuja he's wrong. Mikoto, how could you think this was a good idea?"

"When Kuja visits me in my dreams, he may like to think his little ploys are torment. And... maybe in some ways those dreams are exactly that," Mikoto placed her hands to the table. "But he leaves clues

behind, Zidane. Little details to pick up and put into place. He talks feverently of Princess Arabella, wielding the power of her mother and father for ultimate chaos. He speaks of his desires of meeting her. In many ways, Kuja doesn't entirely understand Arabella. Only that she is able to summon and that she is of your seed. This may make it easier to deceive him that she is not what he wants. If she doesn't have control of both of her parent's powers, then she will be of no use to him. Being only one or the other simply isn't good enough for his desires.”

“I'm still not convinced,” Zidane shook his head. “Kuja knows what he's doing. You're playing directly into his game.”

“Dammit, Zidane,” Eiko slammed her palms to the surface of the table. “Your stubbornness to do anything will have us all killed! Doesn't Kuja visit your dreams, too?! Can't you see what he's doing? He wants you to believe he knows it all, but he *doesn't*.”

“I don't dream,” Zidane shot back, his face hardening. ‘And when I do, I'm just falling in the ocean, longing for the shore, utterly lost. Kuja's not there, Eiko. It's just me and all my regrets.’ There was silence in the room. Zidane's face flushed red

and he ground his teeth together. “Everyone has plans and ideas. Wild ones that may or may not work. Those ideas won’t fly, Eiko. Not when *my* daughter’s life is on the line. You want a good plan that I’ll go along with? Deliver me to Kuja and let *me* deal with it.”

“Zidane, don’t be ridicu—”

“Stop treating this like it’s a goddamn game,” Zidane exploded, throwing his hands out at his side. “It’s not a game, Eiko. There is no room for deception. There’s only room for a blood bath and if that’s what Kuja wants, I’ll give it to him.”

“Zidane, perhaps it’s best you calm—”

“Shut up, Freya,” Zidane snapped, instantly silencing the Dragoon. “Until everyone starts thinking of something *logical*— a real plan to untie Kuja’s—I’m out of here. But I’m not going to sit here and let you convince me that Kuja’s dumb, because he’s *not*. Horn or no horn, Kuja knows what Arabella has inside of her. He’s more powerful than me and you. And you’re not as smart as you think you are, Eiko.”

And with that, the King of Alexandria turned sharply on his heels, being sure to slam the

conference door behind him.

17. Tricks and Tales

Chapter Seventeen

Zidane went to the only place he could find solace in the large Lindblum Castle: the telescope. The blood coursing through his veins pounded and he ground his teeth together as he set his hands to the cool brick. He looked out tensely over the open plains surrounding Lindblum. His eyes lingered on the mountains dividing Lindblum from Alexandria. The fresh autumn breeze swept his hair from his face. He couldn't believe everyone, especially Eiko. How could they all possibly believe this was the one good plan to step forward on? Did they learn nothing from Kuja all those years ago? Zidane had watched the man bleed out and wither away beneath the tangled vines of the Iifa Tree. He had heard him utter words of sorrow, disbelief, and regrets. And yet, it had all meant nothing with his untimely return. There was no deceiving Kuja, Zidane was convinced. Not when Kuja himself was the king of deception. Kuja may have never seen Arabella physically, or truly understood the child, but Zidane knew Kuja was no fool to understanding the true power she had within her. An overwhelming feeling

of fear, panic, and anxiety washed over Zidane. He had denied every plan. He would not go along with misrepresenting Arabella to Kuja. He wouldn't allow her to go on the run. But he had no plans himself and was fearful to make any on the chance it would all go horribly wrong. This was not the time to make mistakes or miscalculations, Zidane told himself. One wrong move and what meager control the group held would be utterly lost. The only way out of this mess, Zidane was convinced, would be by the edge of swords. And Zidane was worked up enough to be ready to pull his daggers at a moments notice, without hesitation to slice skin if it meant protecting his children.

Zidane turned towards the rusty telescope, running his hands along the rigid paint. "Dagger, what do I do? All those years ago... how did I manage all of it? Help me find that courageous boy people always tell me I used to be. I can't do this without you, Dagger. I can't protect both the girls and the kingdom." He felt a lump grow in his throat and he pressed his forehead to the cool metal. "This isn't what I wanted, Dagger. I didn't want any of this. I didn't want to be King... I just wanted you, Dagger... I wish I could take your place in that grave. You belong on the throne to give the people

of Alexandria what they want. What I *can't*. And you deserve to see the three perfect angels you gave birth to... They're growing up so fast, Dagger. The time between when you last held them only grows wider by the day. I wish you could see the young women they're growing into. I wish you could help me raise them. Hell, I don't know if I'm even doing it right..."

Zidane rest his chin to the telescope, leaning the weight of his body against the old sturdy machine. He tried blinking the bleary tears from his eyes to no avail. "This family isn't complete... this kingdom is missing you... and I'm nothing without you, Dagger. Somedays, I want to believe it's all just one terrible nightmare I'm forced to sleep through. But I never wake up. What am I supposed to do, Dagger!? Give me a sign! How do I protect the girls? How do I find the person I once was? He doesn't exist, anymore, I'm convinced. He died a long time ago with you..." Zidane sighed raggedly, again pressing his forehead to the telescope. Chips of the golden paint fluttered down onto his boots. "If you were alive, Dagger, would you even recognize me anymore? I look in the mirror and... I don't even know who the hell is staring back at me. It's like my entire identity faded away and I don't even know the

first place to look for it. Who am I kidding, Dagger? I was never a king. All I've ever been is an Angel of Death who carries that very figment on my shoulders, like a storm cloud that just won't empty. And now... I've brought that chaos onto our daughters and... how could you ever forgive me, Dagger? I know I'll never forgive myself..."

He heard the shifting of boots to the stone just beyond the platform. He tensed, grounding his teeth together. Tensely, Zidane lifted his head to gaze out at the landscape again, his tears finally subsiding. "If you've come to give me some crocodile tears, Eiko, just save it. I've got problems of my own, y'know."

"I know you do, Zidane."

He turned around now, feeling his face heat up. He was confronted with the sight of Beatrix who stood just short of the platform stairs. Her burnette hair glowed in the afternoon light and her face expressed concern that Zidane wanted to believe was baseless. Of all people, however, Zidane knew Beatrix could see through him as if he was nothing more than a translucent leaf. It was often found funny how well Beatrix knew Zidane. And how much he leaned on her for support. A stranger would never guess the complex history of the two. They

would be shocked to hear of Zidane being violently brought to his knees by Beatrix over and over again just two decades before. Now the two were a dynamic team, tasked together to run a kingdom and keep three everchanging princesses in line. Zidane came to the top of the stairs, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You didn’t have to come after me,” Zidane told her.

“I was concerned,” Beatrix’s voice was smooth like velvet. “I know how Eiko can truly push your buttons.”

“Yeah,” Zidane sighed, drawing his eyes away. “She really has the magic touch to make me into a chocobo’s ass, huh?”

“Nobody blames you, Zidane. It’s a very complex situation. No one could even begin to understand the turmoil inside you,” Beatrix replied in her ever-calculated manner. “That being said... we do need to come to a consensus on a plan, Zidane. A back-up plan, too. What’s our next move?”

Zidane uncrossed his arms, feeling his body deflate at the very idea. He drew in a deep breath, his shoulders tense. “*Our* next move is to return to

Alexandria, Beatrix. The castle needs us. We need to make preparations for ourselves and... figure out what to do with the girl's.”

“What *will* we do with the princesses?” Beatrix asked, holding her arms out. “Do you believe it's truly a good idea to keep them at the castle, sitting like ducks?”

“Separation is out of the question for now,” Zidane shook his head.

“Zidane,” Beatrix placed her boot to the first step. ‘I know you want to protect the girl's yourself. But we have a group of willing people downstairs offering a unified shelter for the princesses. We'd be fools not to take advantage of this. If only the nation's had understood each other like this last time, things may have turned out differently.’ Zidane was silent. “Please, tell me, what's on your mind.”

Zidane lowered his head for a moment and he felt the hot tears resurface, much to his frustration. He ground his teeth together and furiously shook his head.

“Zidane, what is it?”

“What if...” Zidane's voice faltered and he willed himself to look at the rather flustered war general.

“What if I do send them away and... I never see them again? What if something happens to them and I’m not there to do something about it? Beatrix, I would never forgive myself if one of them got hurt and I was thousands of miles away from them, unable to do a damn thing about it.”

“Zidane, please have faith,” Beatrix’s voice was gentle now. “The people we would entrust with the princesses would have the same fiery desire to protect them as you do.”

“What if I’m the only person who’s willing to risk my life for it?”

“You know that’s not true,” Beatrix shook her head. “I would gladly allow a sword to pierce my heart if it meant one of them would be safe. You know the same goes for Freya and Eiko, Amarant and Steiner... we all care for them, Zidane. Just like we care for you.”

Zidane let out a long sigh, drooping his shoulders. “Some days I wonder if Kuja really does want Arabella... or if this is all some elaborate rouge to drive me crazy. Because it’s working, Beatrix. I feel like I’m losing my mind. Like I’m standing in the middle of a crowded room,

screaming at the top of my lungs, and yet... nobody's hearing me."

"I hear you, Zidane," Beatrix assured him. "Crystal clear."

"Yes, but does Eiko and the rest of the nations hear me?" Zidane asked, shaking his head.

"There has to be compromise. We cannot have it entirely our way, Zidane. Not in times of war. We have to work together as a team. And that may mean agreeing to things we didn't necessarily calculate for. You have my word of the girl's safety. I've been Alexandria's War General for twenty-five years, Zidane. The princesses well-being is my top concern, you know that." A silence flooded back in between the two, whose minds were reviewing scenario after scenario. They were both uneasy. Beatrix's timidity, in many ways, frightened Zidane. "Perhaps we should go back?"

"Yeah..." Zidane rubbed the nape of his neck. "I guess I owe Eiko an apology, huh?"

Beatrix grinned lightly. "That might do some good." She said, as she began to turn. However, she tensed, her head snapping back towards Zidane in the next moment. "Zidane! Watch out!"

From behind, Zidane felt hands come to reach around his neck. He was beginning to react when he felt a jolt of electricity pulse through his body. It caused a violent wrack to come up his spine and he crumpled at the feeling. Zidane fell to his knees, coughing violently. His arms gave out and he fell flat to the cobblestone and slowly, his vision began to cave in. Beatrix bounded up the stairs, withdrawing her sword as Fauna deftly leap towards the ledge.

“How the hell did you get out of your room?!” Beatrix demanded, still racing towards the grinning agent. She leapt again, towards the other side of the telescope.

“Tricks and tales,” Fauna teased before she disappeared in the blink of an eye. Beatrix stared in utter disbelief for a moment before she hurried back to Zidane’s side. She fell to her knees, carelessly allowing her sword to clatter to the ground.

“Zidane! Zidane!” Beatrix cried, grabbing his shoulder and heaving him onto his back. His head lolled into her lap and she cringed at the sight. A dark ring of blacks and purples belted across Zidane’s neck. Tenderly, she reached down to touch them. It had left rigid bumps and slight burns along

his skin, as well. Beatrix clenched her jaw. “Zidane! Damn it all! Zidane!”

Zidane’s vision was blurry and grainy. A static noise he couldn’t recognize washed through his ears again and again, nearly making him cringe. Limply, his hand moved across the ground, taking with it soft clumps of what felt like... ash? Zidane’s eyes flew open and the only sight that greeted him was bleak grays. Zidane became acutely alert in that moment and lifted his head despite the pounding that beat against his skull. All around him surrounded only a desolate area. One of tall rigid cliffs, nothing of color, and a gentle downfall of ash. Slowly, Zidane came to his knees, his heart beating loudly in his chest. Ash got caught in his hair and eyelashes. Carefully, he came to his feet, feeling rather disoriented. As he inched towards the edge, he felt his heart plummet at the twisty and jagged way down to a misty and bleak fall. It was eerily silent, besides deep ambient noises. Zidane blinked into the ash, looking over the desolate environment that surrounded him.

“I’m so pleased you could make it.”

Zidane spun around, his ankles kicking wakes of ash from his path. What he set his eyes on had his entire body draining of any warmth he had left in him. Standing before Zidane was the slender ashen haired man who had continually haunted him for years. Kuja stood poised with his typical grin. One that both irked and somewhat alarmed Zidane. His long hair was fluffy and well-groomed. He was wearing long velvet purples that drenched his body and flowed gracefully over the mounds of ash surrounding them. He seemed quite content as he lay his bright eyes on Zidane. A red stone was pinned to the top of his cloak, holding it shut, and emulating the being Garland once proclaimed to be. Zidane could only stare, almost in disbelief, that Kuja was seemingly standing right before him again. He felt the hair rising on the back of his neck.

“It’s been so long,” Kuja’s voice was smooth and irksome. “My, the years have been good to you, Zidane. With being a king and a father, I don’t know how you manage to stay so young.”

Zidane was silent. He glanced towards the ash that fell around them. He cocked his head to gaze out towards the jagged cliffs that surrounded the area, reaching up to penetrate the hazy and sad sky.

Zidane's eyelashes fluttered as the ash came across his face.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Kuja grinned, pushing his hair from the frame of his face. He came to stand beside Zidane as they looked out beyond the cliffs edge. Zidane's heart thundered in his chest and again, his voice failed to come out. He was expecting, at any moment, to face his doom. The nauseating dip off the edge had his mind racing. "This is Terra, Zidane. I wanted to bring you here for myself. This is all that remains. And rightfully so."

Zidane scuffed his boots through the growing mounds of ash, pursing his lips. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Your intuitive nature has not escaped you, has it?" Kuja laughed at the idea. 'Of course not, silly me. It was only bound to grow stronger with your seat on the throne. I wanted you to see the aftermath, of course. The image must be seared into my mind, as well as Mikoto's. It's only fair you see, too, the desolation of your origins. You are quite hard to get a hold of today, Zidane.' Zidane cautiously looked to Kuja, who only seemed relaxed and almost content with the sight before his eyes.

“Dear little sister is so gracious to allow me into her dreams... but you... Garland had quite the field day creating a mind as impenetrable as yours. One so concretely driven into human instinct to shut the pain out and lick your own wounds. I had to come up with new ideas so our reunion could be had.”

Zidane drew his shoulders back, again having his eyes follow the decaying horizon. “This is all an illusion, isn’t it? Just another one of your dramatic spectacles. We’re not really in Terra. And we’re not really standing here together.”

“What would make you suggest such a vile thing?” Kuja laughed, smoothing his large sleeves.

“Because then I wouldn’t be able to do this,” Zidane took in a deep breath, his heart racing in his chest. He stepped forward and put his weight into his legs, allowing his foot to step over the cliff’s edge. He felt dizzy for a moment as his other leg joined him. When Zidane looked down, he was suspended above a large void. He felt his stomach plummet at the sight, but holding strong, he continued a little further into the open air and then turned to Kuja, who seemed amused.

“Okay, so you get the gist of my favorite tricks,” Kuja coyly turned his head. In the blink of an eye, he

appeared beside Zidane above the valley and the king started, staggering a few steps back from him. “But there’s a lot you don’t know about me, Zidane. It’s been an awful long time, don’t you think? What kind of brother doesn’t send a letter to his other brother for seventeen years?”

*“Shut up,” Zidane waved his hand. “I’m **not** your brother. We are nothing a like.”*

“Your genetics would beg to differ,” Kuja smiled. “I’ve brought you here to make you an offer. Perhaps... one of a peace.”

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. “Anything you tell me is bullshit at face value.”

“For being the ruler of a kingdom, you sure do curse like a sailor,” Kuja clucked his tongue, seemingly bored by Zidane’s quips. He glanced around the open area. “I’m offering you a second chance, Zidane. I know you just as well as you know me. You’re a humble creature by nature. You exude the reserved confidence and that likeable charm Garland always wanted to perfect. And perhaps the last seventeen years you’ve wondered: What would it have been like if you became the Angel of Death? What if you hadn’t destroyed Terra? Or put a stop to anything the Elephant Lady wanted? What if,

afterall, you simply hadn't been in the right place at the right time?"

Zidane ran his tongue along his teeth. "Life's just a game of luck, isn't it? You thought you'd gotten rid of me. Guess it's not that easy, huh?"

Kuja gingerly clasped his hands behind his back. "I had a lot of time to think, Zidane, when I was recovering. And I began to wonder why, in a jealous rage, I cast you down to Gaia. I couldn't find a reason, a justification. And I began to myself: What would have happened if I had kept Zidane? If I had nurtured him and chosen to help Garland. Perhaps, afterall, it was all counter productive. But I don't want to make that mistake again. I want the Terran souls to live. It is only right. We have been shunned too long."

"You killed Garland and now you want to do this for him?" Zidane shook his head. "I don't think you ever recovered from that brain damage you received, Kuja. Doing this is still only being his pawn. He's dead and you're still lettin' him play you like a violin."

"Oh, no," Kuja shook his head. "This is for me, Zidane. With Terran souls roaming this earth, I can draw power off of them, making me one of the single

most powerful mages to sweep the planet. With a Terran population, I can control Gaia. A feat that old man never would have accomplished. He was too plain a Genome, lonely in his desire. That's why he made little toys to keep him company. I will turn his toys into machines and prove to Garland his attempts were all futile.”

“This isn’t sounding like an offer of peace,” Zidane said plainly.

“Yes, Your Majesty, it is getting there,” Kuja smiled widely, bearing his pearly white teeth. “Become one of my agents, Zidane. Let me teach you the ways of our operations. You will be that of a special agent, as you possess the most pure of the genetic sequence. To speed this process up, I need you to remove Gaian souls and replace them with Terran souls.”

“You’re asking me to kill innocent people for you?” Zidane’s eyes hardened.

“You act like you know every single person who lives in your kingdom,” Kuja nearly rolled his eyes. “Nobody will question the difference in some vagrant or even a shoe shiner. I’m not asking you for much.”

“No way,” Zidane replied sharply. “I will never work with you or for you, Kuja.”

“Then that’s too bad. Your only other option is giving to me Princess Arabella.”

Zidane tensed at the sound of his daughter’s name coming from Kuja’s lips. It amused the ashen haired man, who grinned and tilted his head to the side, absently playing with a feather braided into his locks. Zidane felt his hands curl into his fists.

“I have my reasonings,” Kuja merely shrugged. “She is quite powerful, Zidane. I can sense it. A Summoner of a Genome’s seed...” He chuckled. “My, even the history books would be astounded with a title such as that. It’s remarkable, really. But don’t worry, I wish her no harm. She is a unicorn, in many ways. Very precious. With me as her mentor, oh, imagine the things she could do, Zidane.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think we’d just give her to you,” Zidane said, staring coldly at the calm and collected man, whose neverending patience was bothersome. “I don’t care what you promise or think of her, I don’t believe a damn word that’s comin’ out of your mouth. She’s not going to be your protégé and there’s no way she would even go willingly with you. She’s not some baby who will

forget where's she from. She knows where she belongs.”

“Unwillingness flourishes into curiosity and then on to observation and eventually to interest,” Kuja counted off on his slender fingers. “I can make her see reason. I may not feel much of anything, but I sure am charming, wouldn’t you say?”

“More like clownish,” Zidane muttered.

“I put all this together for you, yet here you are rejecting both my offers,” Kuja arched his eyebrows. ‘But that’s okay. Because I predicted you would be stubborn at first. It’s in your nature.’ Zidane only stared with a stony face at Kuja. “This isn’t the last you’ll see of me. That little electric jolt you felt? Yes, it was a tiny little virus I created to penetrate inside your skin. I’m in your bloodstream, Zidane. Now we don’t have to worry about writing letters to each other. I can come visit you whenever I want. And with due time your unwillingness will sprout into curiosity. You know what will come next. One way or another.”

Zidane felt a coolness wash over him at the thought. And suddenly, his stomach had jolted to his throat as he found himself falling into the blackness below while Kuja only watched from above.

Zidane shot up, gasping sharply with a ragged and dry throat. Immediately, several sets of hands came to touch him, pressing against his chest and forehead and arms. They forced him backwards into a bed. Zidane's head throbbed as he blinked rapidly, his vision slowly becoming clear. He bobbed in his bed, completely disoriented. But it soon began to register he was on an airship, inside a narrow wooden cabin that had one too many people jammed into it.

"He's stabilizing," He heard a voice he couldn't quite make out. Zidane couldn't see anyone's faces. 'His heart rate is coming back down. So is his temperature. Get some more ice.' He could hear boots to the floorboards and loud shifting, closing of drawers, that rattled inside his brain. After a moment, a coolness came across his neck and forehead and down his arms. "Zidane? Are you with us? Can you hear me?" A hand came into his vision, followed by a soft green light. Zidane's eyes opened widely now and suddenly, his hearing cleared.

Slowly, he came to prop himself up on his elbows. Cloths full of ice slid down his body as he looked around the cabin. Sitting beside him was Eiko, who was setting a thermometer on the

nightstand. At the foot of the bed was Freya and Beatrix. Beatrix looked absolutely relieved to see Zidane conscious. A thin layer of sweat covered her face and she pressed her arm to her forehead. Just three hours before, as they boarded the airship with a flaringly hot Zidane, Beatrix had handed a letter to a Lindblum Dart Ship pilot. He was able to drive the quickest aircraft on the Mist Continent.

“Please, you have to go to the Alexandrian Castle now!” Beatrix had shouted over the roar of the airship engine. “This is absolutely urgent. Deliver this letter only to the hands of Captain Adelbert Steiner, do you understand?”

“Yes, General,” The pilot saluted before hurriedly putting the parchment into his satchel and racing away for deployment.

Zidane let out a long uneven breath as he slowly raked his hands through his hair. His head felt tender, like all the blood in his body was swirling about in it. His hands shook rather violently, so he lowered them. Eiko offered him a glass of water, which he drank nearly the entirety of.

“Where are we going?” Zidane asked with a hoarse voice.

“To Alexandria,” Beatrix replied. “We are taking you to Doctor Tot.”

Zidane let out a cough. “I already know what’s wrong with me.”

Steiner was out making his rounds in the garden as the sun begin to set into a swirl of sherberts. He was curious where Princess Sarah’s hiding spot in the garden really was. It seemed to be constantly changing, as if she was privvy to his nosiness. He wasn’t eager to return inside either. He had promised, pinky promised, to Princess Alex that he would play a round of Tetra Master with him. He barely understood the game and wondered if she was lying to him about how long a round actually took. Princess Arabella had been holed up in the sitting chambers with a pile of books around her. Steiner was thankful for her introversion as he always found her in the same place. He certainly didn’t want to alarm her with constant hawking induced by her father’s curt message. So far, she hadn’t questioned why he had joined them for every meal since Zidane and Beatrix had left. Perhaps she chalked it up to always having a patriarch’s presence at the table.

A droning in the sky caught his attention, drawing him from his thoughts. It was approaching rapidly from just the beginning edge of Alexandria. As it came closer, Steiner recognized it as one of the revered Lindblum Dart Ship's. It was heading directly for the castle. Hurriedly, Steiner ran through the garden, approaching the west end of the castle, where a large port door was sealed.

“Open the port! Airship in bound!” Steiner cupped his hands around his mouth. Quickly, his soldiers set to running in circles to push the wooden levers. The gate groaned horrendously loud, shaking the very ground, as it dropped in the nick of time as the Dart Ship pulled itself in through the gate. Steiner covered his ears as the engines groaned to a half. He approached the side of the airship as the pilot dropped his goggles around his neck and pulled his leather cap off. Deftly, he leapt out of the cock pit, his satchel beating against his hip.

“Captain Adelbert Steiner?” He shouted over the dying engine. Steiner nodded. The pilot extended a rolled letter from his satchel. “Express delivery from General Beatrix, sir!”

“Beatrix?” Steiner echoed in surprised, not even hesitating to accept the letter. He turned away from

the pilot to escape out into the garden, where the sounds were less deafening. With nearly shaking hands, he unfurled the letter to reveal Beatrix's neat and precise handwriting.

*Steiner— Medical Emergency. It's Zidane. Have Doctor Tot ready in the infirmary. We are departing from Lindblum. We should be there by midnight.
Beatrix.*

18. Confinement

Chapter Eighteen

Steiner anxiously suggested to the girls that they should be in the chambers no later than nine o'clock. Then bathe no later than ten. And to be asleep long before midnight. Every time he walked past a window, he glued himself to it, his eyes darting everywhere in the sky. The twinkly stars sometimes deceived him and he froze up, hoping the girl's were not looking out their windows. Beatrix's letter was not satisfying in the least. If anything, it left Steiner on even more pins and needles. A medical emergency? With Zidane? What could have possibly happened? Sure, his negotiations skills weren't top knotch, but surely not inept enough to have him beaten to death? Steiner wanted to think it was petulant matters. An accident that lead to unlucky wounds. But he felt like, deep down inside, it was much graver circumstances. Steiner knew Kuja's capacity. He most likely was aware of a War Committee.

As the night waned on, Steiner walked endlessly through the hallways, waiting for the signal of the

airships arrival. Where was it? Steiner ran every scenario through his mind. What if they had stopped because Zidane's wounds proved too grave? Even worse, what if it was shot down in a fiery display, leaving no survivors? He shook those thoughts away as he came to stand on the platform of the stairs. The milky moonlight bled through the gold pane windows and he watched with a thundering heart, doing his best to swallow his fears.

Dammit, Zidane, you can't die on us before it all really begins, Steiner's face had grown blank, his hands placed behind his back, as he lost himself in the sanguid night sky. *Beatrix would never let that happen. Zidane, you must pull through.* One of Steiner's worst nightmares was outliving Dagger. When she had taken her final breath all those years ago, Steiner could only blame himself. She was so young, he questioned the planet for months and years following: why her? Why not me? It would be like reliving that nightmare all over again if Zidane died on his watch. Steiner could only cling to a shred of hope he had inside of him. Zidane was a fighter. A big time survivor. Surely whatever had happened now was not enough to stop him. *Zidane won't die,* Steiner told himself. *He would never check out. He would never leave the princesses*

alone like that. Even if he wanted to, Beatrix wouldn't let him.

“Steiner?” The Captain was startled, gazing up the flight of stairs beside him. At the very top was the smallest princess of Alexandria. She was wearing a fluffy white nightgown that hung heavily on her wiry body. Her blonde curls were unruly falling down her shoulders.

“Princess Alex, what are you doing up?” Steiner turned towards her, masking his inner anguish and anxiety. “It’s well after eleven.”

“I can’t sleep,” Alex told him. Her slippers were muted to the carpet as she slowly came down to stand before him. Alex cocked her head back to look at him. “You’re still awake, too.”

“Yes, well, a man such as myself doesn’t need the rest, like you do,” Steiner told her with as even a voice as possible. “If you want to grow big and strong, you have to get a full nights sleep.”

“That doesn’t make me anymore tired,” Alex sighed, hunching her shoulders. “I miss Daddy. When is he coming home? He’s the only person in this entire castle that doesn’t utterly stink at Tetra Master... no offense, Steiner.”

“He’ll be home soon,” Steiner assured her. ‘These things simply take time, Princess. Please try to understand.’ Nervously, Steiner looked towards the round window above the grand doors of the castle. Still just an empty sky littered with bright stars. “Perhaps some warm milk might help?”

“Make it hot chocolate and you have a deal.”

The princess was easily as persuasive as her father.

Zidane now sat propped up in bed against a mountain of pillows. His head throbbed horrendously, his neck emanating with heat. He held a cool rag to his forehead, trying not to let the motion of the airship turn his stomach inside out. Beside him on a stool was Eiko. She was the only one left in the room who had chosen not to resign for a curt sleep before landing. She continually resoaked his rag and cleaned his bandages that now plastered his neck. On top of his wounds from his first assault, Zidane was a sore sight. She could see he was in dire pain. With how fast his heart was beating and how high his temperature spiked, she had no doubt Zidane had acquired a migraine. He

had been unwilling to speak much, mostly because it hurt. His voice was scratchy and hoarse from the shock. Eiko carefully had been watching him for nearly six hours. Zidane's eyes flittered to her.

“You know, you can go to bed. No need to watch me, I'll be fine,” Zidane limply waved his hand at her.

“Absolutely not,” Eiko told him, furrowing her brow. “Zidane, your heart rate was going off the charts. And your body temperature... Nobody could survive that but somehow you did. And with no brain damage. What happened? You say you know what's wrong with you. Well? I've been waiting all night for an explanation.”

Zidane shifted in his bed, tenderly holding his head. He sighed and sank against the pillows again. On command, Eiko lifted the quilts over him. Zidane tilted his head back and closed his eyes, simply holding the rag to his face. Eiko only watched him. “What do you know about virus injection?”

“W... what?” Eiko sat up straight, her face softening to a slight horror. “Zidane, why would you ask me something like that?”

“Because I need to know,” Zidane looked to her now, his hair ruffled against the pillows. “Do I ask you or do I ask Doctor Tot?”

Eiko’s hands grasped her skirt. “My... my knowledge is limited. Doctor Tot knows more. But... Zidane... you’re not suggesting what I’m thinking?”

“Is it possible through magic?” Zidane asked, his red glazed eyes looking at her almost earnestly.

Eiko furrowed her brow and lowered her chin. “It’s possible... I suppose if you’re a skilled alchemist, you could create something for your gloves. It’s more of contact with the gear, more so than the magic... You think Fauna touched your neck and injected a virus into you?”

“I don’t think, I know,” Zidane directed his eyes to the ceiling, lowering the cloth from his forehead. He heaved a deep scratchy sigh, his chest sinking. “I was with Kuja, Eiko. He had me in this destroyed world that was on fire and raining ash. He said it was Terra...”

“You were most likely having a fevered dream, Zidane,” Eiko said, leaning forward. He could tell she really wanted to believe that. But his unmoving

face had her shoulders somewhat drooping. “What else did Kuja say?”

Zidane tucked a hand behind his head, still watching the boring wood panes above him. “He gave me two options. One was to give him Arabella. Or... I could join his forces and help replace Gaian souls with Terran souls.”

“Well, you rejected both of those offers, right?” Eiko asked.

“Yeah, but he’s deadset on convincin’ me,” Zidane looked to her now. ‘He said with the little virus he put inside of me, he could visit me anytime he wants.’ In the next moment, Eiko sprang to the side of the bed and began gingerly peeling Zidane’s bandages off. “Yeowch! Ow, ow, ow! Whaddya doin’?”

“Sorry, I need to look at the wounds. Maybe, just maybe, we can get a clue as to how to get rid of it,” Eiko explained as she disregarded the bandages on the night table and began to observe his scabby wounds across his neck. Purples and blues extended from the crusty skin, along with greens on the outskirt. It would most likely heal as a scar.

“I think it’s a bloodstream thing,” Zidane croaked. “So, if you’re alright with blood letting...”

“That hasn’t been practiced for a hundred years,” Eiko deadpanned. “When we land, I’ll get Doctor Tot’s opinion. There has to be some antibiotic or shot we can give you that will kill the virus. That is... if it’s true what you saw.”

“Like I said, I don’t dream,” Zidane said in a flat hoarse voice. “Kuja did something to me, Eiko. I feel... weird...”

“In what way?” Eiko sat back on the bed, pressing her hand to his arm.

“I feel very light. Like my body doesn’t weigh anything. And... my vision is clearer. The only thing that hurts is my head.”

Eiko was beginning to worry Zidane maybe did sustain some internal trauma. Her face was oozing with worry and Zidane looked to her with a furrowed brow. “We’re almost to Alexandria. Anything that’s wrong with you, we’re going to fix it, Zidane,” She gripped his arm tightly, pursing her lips. “I just need more equipment and more space. But... we’ll figure this out, I promise.”

Princess Alex had been sent back to bed only fifteen minutes before Steiner was alerted of the airships arrival over town walls. The Captain was an absolute anxious mess as the soldiers hurried around him in preparation of landing. Doctor Tot had chosen to meet everyone at the airship dock and he waited rather patiently beside the antsy Steiner. Two soldiers with a stretcher idled nearby, along with an infantry of back-up in case of any surprises. Additional nurses lingered on the outskirts. The groan of the airship began to fill through the docks and Steiner pensively watched as it glided through the arching entry. He had no idea what awaited him on the other side of that door. What would he be confronted with? Quickly, the Knights of Pluto went onto the ship, escorting people off. Steiner counted off the pilots and shiphands. The door leading towards the quarters flung open and the first to emerge was Freya.

Doctor Tot and Steiner came to the plank to greet her as she stepped off. "Freya, it's been awhile," Steiner said, shaking her hand. "I'm glad to have you here."

"Always with the formalities, no matter the time of day," Freya grinned in her reserved way. "A delight, too, Steiner. Though, I'm sure you have

much more on your mind than how I am. Beatrix and Eiko are with Zidane now.”

“Shall I send a cot?” Steiner asked.

“No, don’t worry ‘bout it,” A hoarse voice came from the deck. Steiner’s eyes snapped to see a sore looking Zidane. A purple left eye, a split open eyebrow, busted lips, swollen cheekbone, and a mess of bandages on his neck. No doubt the princesses would be horrified to see him. He was walking, however, which seemed promising.

“Goodness Gracious, Zidane!” Doctor Tot exclaimed.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Zidane assured them, waving his hands. “I just need to wash my face, that’s all.”

Doctor Tot came into the king’s path, standing up on the tip of his feet. The owl inspected Zidane closely, who tried to lean away from his gleaming bifocals. “You require stitches. Go to the infirmary now. We must clean you up before dawn, when the princesses awaken.”

Eiko came out from airship now, holding a small leather satchel up. “I brought cosmetics.”

“Are you serious?” Zidane’s voice was flat.

“A lady never travels without them,” Eiko lifted her chin. “Besides, you and I have a similar complexion. I can make those bruises disappear.”

“Come along now,” Doctor Tot waved his wing. “We have not a moment to spare, it’s a quarter past midnight.”

Begrudgingly, Zidane left with Eiko and Doctor Tot, Freya right on their heels. The soldiers on duty were dismissed and slowly funneled out of the room. Steiner sighed at the quietness of the airship dock, but paused when he heard the clearing of a throat. He looked over his shoulder to see his entire world standing on the edge of the plank. Beatrix’s small, but meaningful, smile lit his mind up, her brown chestnut hair gleaming in the overhead light. Hurriedly, Steiner raced to her, swooping her slender body up in his arms. He held her tightly, her arms locked around his neck. They nearly shook in each other’s grip. Beatrix’s wet eyelashes fluttered to Steiner’s neck, causing goosebumps to pucker down his skin. Even with the silent tears bubbling in her eyes, she was nothing short of beautiful.

“Things are going to get really bad, Steiner,” Beatrix told him in a hushed voice. ‘This isn’t going

to be a simple war. Listen to me... what war is ever really simple? But this time... "Beatrix gazed towards the exit of the dock." Kuja has new tricks up his sleeves.' Beatrix tore away from Steiner, crossing her arms over her chest and pacing a few feet. "I'm already losing, Steiner. I've already failed. How can I call myself a war general and allow for Zidane to be wounded like that?"

"You cannot blame yourself," Steiner came up behind her, placing his hand on her shoulder. "Like you said, Kuja knows new tricks. And he seems to have a much more organized group of people who obey his every whim. He's not piggybacking off of someone else's greed this time. He's acting of his own accord."

Beatrix tensed beneath his warm grip. "I'm losing my touch, Steiner. The very thing that happened to my father... it's going to happen to me."

Beatrix had never spoken much of her father. Moreso of her mother, who was a homemaker and dedicated herself to baking fine culinary treats and made the most darling clothes that had Beatrix the envy of every child in her corridor. Her mother had been the ones to place those thick bottom curls in her voluminous brown hair and Beatrix had

continued in her adulthood to work the foam into her hair every night for the vibrant pop. But Beatrix's father was simultaneously someone who Beatrix looked up to and feared in her waking life.

"What do you mean?" Steiner asked carefully, hoping to learn more. "I don't understand."

Beatrix pursed her lips. "Never mind... let's go to bed. I haven't slept in two days."

"... a virus?" Doctor Tot echoed, looking to Zidane who was again propped up in bed. His face had been cleaned and his eyebrow had received stitches. He had fought tooth and nail against Eiko, however. He refused to powder his face. Freya was seated on a nearby vacant bed, Eiko on a stool beside Zidane. Doctor Tot had been pacing back and forth and everyone's eyes followed him anxiously. "It's certainly not unheard of," Doctor Tot paused, looking over his shoulder. "Biological warfare is one of the oldest tricks in the book as far as the history of war is concerned."

"Well, how do we get rid of it?" Zidane asked with his hoarse voice.

Doctor Tot folded her feathers beneath his chin.
“Eiko, please repeat the symptoms.”

“Loss of consciousness, high fever, elevated heart beat, high blood pressure, convulsions, nausea...” Eiko tilted her head back and forth. “Those are all the ones I noticed, anyway.”

“And when he awoke?”

“His heart beat and temperature immediately began to stabilize.”

“Hmm...” Doctor Tot furrowed his brow.

“Kuja told me it was in my bloodstream,” Zidane said.

“I still think you were just having fevered dreams, for goodness sakes, Zidane, we could have baked cookies on your abs,” Eiko shook her head.

“It was not just a dream!” Zidane shouted, but he immediately went into a coughing fit. He reached for his water. “It was really Kuja, Eiko. Mikoto sees him, too. That’s what he does. He visits our dreams. Even Bella has seen him. He’s really there.”

“Fine, fine,” Doctor Tot waved his arms, trying to ease the tension. “It’s certainly nothing I’ve ever heard of before. It’s an unfortunate call I have to

make, but I need to see Zidane experience this phenomena again so I can understand more clearly what we are up against. I cannot in good conscious start giving you any sort of antibiotics, Zidane.”

“You can’t give me anything?” Zidane asked, seemingly distressed at the idea. “What if this happens again while I’m with my daughter’s? It’ll scare the hell out of them, Doctor.”

“Perhaps we should keep you on bedrest,” Doctor Tot suggested.

“No way,” Zidane shook his head. “That’s exactly what Kuja wants. I can’t be in bed right now.”

“What if Kuja’s waiting for you to get in the perfect position to do this again?” Eiko countered. “You should stay in bed where we can monitor you.”

“But—”

“Beatrix and Steiner, as per rank, can handle the throne in your time of rest,” Eiko told him.

“The last thing I’m concerned about is the throne,” Zidane told her flatly. “Doctor Tot, you’re not serious, are you?”

“I believe it’s for the best, Zidane,” Doctor Tot said. “Your temperature and heart rate were at

extreme levels. It's best you stay off your feet for now so we can be sure you make a full recovery."

Zidane sighed, slumping into his pillows. He waxed and waned between feeling absolutely defeated and downright frustrated. Kuja had bested him, whether he liked to believe that or not. Zidane wanted to think it really was a fevered dream. Perhaps a one time thing. But his anxiety overrode those thoughts. Kuja wasn't playing games. He was completely upturning the board. Maybe it was all part of his elaborate plan to take Zidane's piece from the line up, but the king had to think quickly from where he now laid up in bed. He pursed his lips and looked towards Freya.

"Will you take Bella to Burmecia with you tomorrow morning?"

Everyone in the room seemed quite surprised by the request. Freya rose from the bed, coming to stand beside her old friend. "You're certain that's what you would like? You're speaking with a clear mind?"

"No fog up there," Zidane shook his head. "It's for the best, Freya. I need to keep Bella away from me if I really am carryin' something. You have some place safe to keep her, right? Somewhere warm and

cozy? She loves the rain. It's her favorite weather to read in. You'll make sure she has plenty to read, right? She loves waffles drizzled in chocolate. And peppermint tea."

Freya could see deep in Zidane's tired eyes his concern. It radiated out of him. It was so obvious how much he loved those girl's. In a way, it was still foreign to Freya, even after nearly two decades, to see Zidane responsible for other little human lives—and to see him excel well at it. She had never imagined the goofy wayward drifting boy could become a father of three girls. Freya was more inclined to believe he would become a king first. Zidane was quite irritable and fiery in Lindblum. Many of the other leaders commented being surprised by the usually calm and chipper Zidane. But his actions in that moment were careful and full of love. He had seemed to be calculating his words and his steps. His daughter's were his entire world—in some sorts, all he had left of Dagger. And it was clear to see every day that Zidane was falling apart without her.

"I will make sure she is well-tended to," Freya said, reaching down to tenderly touch his wrist. "She will be safe and warm with a comfortable bed to lay

her head down at night. And she will have a plethora to read, I promise, Zidane.”

Zidane clenched his jaw and swallowed a growing lump in his throat. “Keep her safe, Freya. I trust that you will.”

Freya pressed her hand to her woven allegiance to Burmecia. “It is my newfound sworn duty and honor to protect and provide refuge to Princess Arabella, as Alexandria has done for my people, too.”

“Thank you, Freya,” Zidane nodded. After a moment of silence, Zidane slowly began to get out of bed despite the rising protests. When he stood, he was slightly woozy, and caught the edge of the bed to steady himself. He let out a deep sigh, trying to hold his shoulders straight. “I’m not sleepin’ here. I just... I want to be with my daughter’s. Please.”

“Well... alright,” Doctor Tot nodded. “Come back tomorrow morning so I can check your temperature and so on.”

Zidane began towards the door, doing his best to look sharp and coherent. Luckily, Eiko didn’t chase after him and he climbed the stairs, leaning on the railing for support. He was already winded and he

cursed under his breath as he took the next flight of stairs. He finally reached the hallway to the girl's chambers and he raked his hair back from his face, letting out another sigh. Straight down the hallway, it lead towards a wall of large windows. The moon and stars glittered brightly and Zidane gazed out towards it, feeling utterly miserable. His life had been turned completely upside down. He didn't want to go for this ride. He wanted off.

His head suddenly throbbed sharply and he winced, leaning over for a moment. Zidane pressed his hand to his temple and ground his teeth together as it subsided. He blinked rapidly, looking to the moon again. His entire body was washed over in a chill. He willed himself to look away from the moon and quietly, he opened the door to the sitting chambers. It was dark and quiet. Each door to the girl's rooms were closed. Zidane stealthily slid through the door and threw himself onto the plush looking couch. He sunk into the mountain of throw pillows and grabbed a woven blanket that dangled off the back. He let out a long sigh as he settled in. Alex's Tetra cards were scattered all over the coffee table. Some were even on the floor. Bella had a stack of books precariously balanced on the windowsill. And Sarah's many hand embroidery projects were

left scattered on desks and bookshelves. He was entirely surrounded by his girl's world and it comforted him as he lay on that couch. Slowly, the relief of drowsiness washed over him and Zidane easily slipped into a slumber. And for the first time ever, he was thankful to not dream.

19. Sugar Coating

A/N: I'm going camping for the rest of the week, so I really wanted to pound out two back-to-back chapters!

Chapter Nineteen

Sarah awoke as the sun began to break over the mountains in the distance. She sat up in bed, letting out a long yawn as she raked her hair back from her face. She gazed around her room, almost disappointed she hadn't found Dante waiting for her with his boyish smile. Sarah decided to go rouse Alex. It was time to wash her hair and the young princess never did a thorough cleaning. Sarah pulled her robe on. The mornings were getting chillier and chillier. As she entered the sitting room, she stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing someone on the couch. Sarah hurried forward and gazed over, laying eyes on her father with his face pressed into a pillow. She furrowed her brow, inspecting his bruises and stitches. Silently, she came around the couch and knelt down, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

“Daddy?” Sarah gave him a gentle nudge.
“Daddy?”

Slowly, Zidane’s eyes fluttered open and he blinked rapidly. He propped himself up on his elbow, rubbing his eyes. “Good morning, Sarah.”

“When did you get back? And why are you sleeping on the couch?” Sarah tilted her head to the side. Her father let out a wide yawn and sat up completely now, stretching his back.

“I got back last night. I was so excited to see you three, I decided to sleep here,” Zidane grinned.

“Okay, last question,” Sarah looked to him. “What happened to your face? And... your neck?”

“That’s a long story,” Zidane said, adjusting the collar on his shirt. “But I’m okay. I’m just going to need a couple days of bedrest and I’ll be just fine.”

Sarah looked at him with seemingly hard eyes. He could distinguish that look quite well. Dagger had given it to him well over a dozen times. They were knowing eyes that could see through an opaque piece of glass. “It’s because the war has started, hasn’t it? And they’re trying to pick off the strongest so they’re coming after you?”

“Not necessarily the last part,” Zidane shook his head. He sighed, pressing his elbows to his knees. He spoke quietly to Sarah as she sat on the floor beside him, her nightgown flaring out around her slender legs. “But... war is going to happen, Sarah. I can’t shield you three from the world any longer. What I learned in Lindblum... well, I have to start taking action. And I guess that action comes with the obligation of an explanation...” Zidane paused, hunching his sore shoulders. “I will talk to all of you at breakfast.”

Breakfast was always the time Zidane told the girl’s important things. It’s as if he believed a cherry pastry and yogurt could make all the problems seem much more simplified. It’s when he had told them of their mother’s developing illness. It’s where he had delivered the news of his impending travels. It had always been breakfast. Fleetingly, Sarah’s eyes glanced to her duffel bag that had been hurriedly stashed beneath the couch from Steiner’s gaze.

After a moment, a door creaked open and Alex squealed in an octave unknown to humans. She raced across the room, flinging her arms around Zidane. His entire body radiated with pain as she dove into his lap. Upon pressing her face to his neck, however, she was pulling back to realize he was

bandaged up. Alex stared intently with her dark eyes, furrowing her brow.

“What happened to you? Did you get in one of those pub fights?” Alex asked.

“Sort of,” Zidane shrugged, tenderly pushing her blonde curls from her face. It felt so wonderful to lay eyes on his girl’s again. He only knew it would be a long emotional day, however, after the next hour leading to breakfast. He pinched Alex’s rosy cheek. “I sure did miss all of you.”

“It was *so* boring without you,” Alex crossed her arms over the tangled lace on the chest of her nightgown. “Steiner is no fun. And he’s awful at Tetra Master.”

Zidane grinned lopsidedly. “Hey, he’s an old man. Be nice to him.”

“He won’t even let me put three marshmallows in my hot chocolate,” Alex shook her head furiously at the thought. “Like one more marshmallow could make the whole universe explode!”

Bella’s door finally opened and the dark groggy teen emerged from her room. She rubbed at her eyes, her short black hair fanned out around the frame of her face. She looked displeased with all the

racket, but upon seeing her father, her face lit up and she came to the back of the couch. It was quickly extinguished, however, as she looked closely at him. Bella's dark eyes darted all over his face as she analyzed the bruises and stitches.

"It's really happening," Bella said, feeling her insides constrict. "Daddy, I did this to you."

"Hey, hey," Zidane lifted Alex from his lap, quickly coming to his feet. He rounded the couch, pressing his hands into her shoulders. "You didn't do anything, okay? None of this is your fault, Bella."

Bella's face flushed as she looked towards his heavily bandaged neck. "Did the white haired man do this to you?"

"W... what?" Zidane felt a chill come over him and his hands loosened on her wiry shoulders. "Why would you say something like that, Bella?"

"Because he told me he had harmed you," Bella replied, her voice etched in concern. "I only thought he was joking. He's just a figment of my imagination, how could he? He said it was for your own good."

Zidane pressed a hand to Bella's cheek, relieved she was not running a fever. He pursed his lips,

glancing to the other girl's, who were wrought with worry. Zidane walked a few paces towards the door and stopped. "Each one of you take a bath and get dressed. We'll talk at breakfast."

Breakfast that morning hosted a full house. Sarah, Bella, and Alex were delighted to see Freya at the table. It was foreign seeing Steiner and Beatrix opting to sit for the meal. Princess Eiko seated herself beside Zidane. The king felt refreshed after taking a bath and combing his hair. His head throbbed heavily, however, and his lack of sleep was rearing an ugly head. Doctor Tot sat on the other end of the table, his plate arranged with various berries. Alex was delighted by the company after such a long spell of boredom. Sarah and Bella, however, were sitting on pins and needles as they collected biscuits, jams, and fruits onto their plates. Eiko looked to the side of Zidane's face in the vibrant sunlight that bled into the tall vaulted ceilings of the dining hall. The bruises, scabs, and stitches leapt out at Eiko, making her want to wince. Zidane kept his eyes trained down, aware of her staring. Sarah looked between each adult at the table who seemed

quite preoccupied. She gripped her silver fork tightly, pursing her lips.

“Why is breakfast such an event this morning?” Sarah asked, directing all eyes towards her. “Daddy, you said you were going to talk to us. Why is everyone here?”

Zidane had been trying to organize his thoughts in those first five minutes of silence. Upon his daughter’s demands, he felt everyone’s eyes rest on him. Zidane looked up, gazing down the table. He felt the weight of leadership fall onto his shoulders again. A heavy burden washed over him. Everybody at this table was dear to him. How could he be certain he was doing the right thing? How did he know he could really keep everyone safe? Why did everyone look to him for guidance? Zidane felt as if he was nothing more than a sailboat encased inside a thick fog. Which direction would lead them to safety? Zidane was no more than blindly guessing.

“I want everyone to hear it from me,” Zidane lowered his silverware, clanging it to the edge of the china dish. “War is going to happen. We’re going to plan carefully and as long as we all stick together, everything should be alright.” He didn’t believe a

word that was coming from his mouth. He was certain his voice carried no notes of confidence.

“War with who?” Alex asked, lowering her half eaten strawberry back to her plate.

“The same man we all unfortunately dealt with all those years ago. His name is Kuja.”

“And what does he want now?” Sarah asked, furrowing her brow. “I thought you and Mother stopped him. Why is he doing this all again?”

Zidane felt himself withdrawing inside. These were questions he expected, but felt no energy to confront and answer. He ran his hand along his stubbly chin, clenching his jaw together. He felt Eiko’s eyes again staring into him. Zidane sighed, pushing his hands through his fading blond hair.

“I can’t sugar coat this anymore,” Zidane’s hoarse voice said, drenched in frustration. ‘It’s like trying to make the most bitter and ugly of medicines taste sweet.’ He pressed his palms flat to the table, looking between each of his daughter’s. “Kuja is a very powerful mage. He knows all sorts of magic and he knows what he wants. He wants to control Gaia. And he wants Bella to work with him.”

“Is this... the white haired man?” Bella’s face was exceptionally pale now.

“Yes, he’s visiting you in your dreams. He visits me, too,” Zidane said. It felt so wrong directing these words to her. He could see the very fabric of Bella’s world crumbling from beneath her. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you, Bella.”

Bella threw her linen napkin directly into her plate, coming to her feet. “This is all your fault!” Bella pointed towards Eiko, whose bright blue eyes lit up in surprise. Everyone at the table watched in a solemn yet shocked silence. “The world was normal before you tried to convince me I was gifted. I’m not gifted at all. I’m a hell-mongering pawn. How could you do this to me?!”

“Arabella, relax,” Eiko held her hands up. “You *are* gifted. But don’t believe for one moment you’ve transpired these events. These actions belong to Kuja.”

“All you’ve made me believe is that I have just put a target on the backs of my family,” Bella’s cheeks had grown red now and a fire roared in her eyes that Zidane had never quite seen before. “He’s only done this because you’ve allowed me to open his door of opportunity. Everything my mother

fought for, you carelessly threw it away to make me believe Summoners are something to celebrate. It's not! Just like Daddy said, it's dangerous. And so are you.”

“Arabella...” Eiko’s voice oozed with hurt at her mentees words.

“Arabella, if I please may elaborate,” Doctor Tot stood from his end of the table now. Bella gazed towards him, her slender body tense. Everyone glanced to the emotional princess as if they were looking at an upset Princess Garnet all over again. “It’s not fair to say Kuja has only become inspired by your Summoner heritage. Why, Kuja is fascinated by you because of both of your parents. Part-Summoner, part-Genome, Kuja is under the assumption you are the perfect candidate to aid him in his malicious tasks. He’s a fool, of course, for assuming you would even entertain the idea of being his mentee.”

“Genome...?” Sarah echoed. “What does that mean?”

“I am a Genome,” Zidane said, folding his hands beneath his chin. He seemed so utterly spent. “I was born on a planet named Terra and brought here. And you all have the Genome code inside of you.”

“We’re not... completely human?” Sarah could hear her heart throbbing in her ears.

“You’re not far off,” Doctor Tot assured them.

“Daddy’s an alien?” Alex looked around the room of adults with a face of bewilderment.

“Well, that’s a rather primitive way of saying he’s just different,” Freya lowered her tea. “None of us are completely human, wouldn’t you agree?”

“If he can do this to Daddy, what’s stopping him from just taking me against my will?” Bella looked to Eiko. “Why did you let me do this and learn all of this? You knew I always wanted to be useful but now I wish I was nothing but useless.”

Zidane stood now, too, looking intently at his daughter. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Bella. This isn’t your fight. It’s mine. And now it’s finally time to take care of what I should have seventeen years ago. You’re not staying here in Alexandria. You will leave with Freya after breakfast for Burmecia.”

“What?!” Alex cried.

Sarah stood, wrapping her arms around Bella’s shoulders. “You can’t just send her away, Daddy!

We have to protect her.”

“This is how we will protect her,” Zidane replied. “Bella can’t sit here and wait for Kuja.”

Sarah tightened her grip on her younger sister. “By being frightened, you’re letting Kuja win. If he thinks he’s so tough, he can come here and try to take Bella. I won’t let him, Daddy.”

“Sarah—”

“No,” Sarah shook her head defiantly. “My mother fought for her crown and I will do the same. Alexandria is my home and my refuge. I won’t allow for the throne to fail Bella.”

“There is more to consider,” Zidane told her. “We don’t know what we’re completely up against, Sarah. Bella may not have to be away for long, but the best thing we can do is keep her from harms way. And *you’re* not doing any fighting.”

“I’m not some petulant child!” Sarah snapped back. “You said no more sugar coating, right? Well, good, I’m sick of it, Daddy. This is the real world. You’ll let dozens of young men in town enlist. Do me the honors and let me fight for what we believe in. Don’t tell me to sit down and look pretty when my mother’s legacy is at risk.”

The room fumbled into silence as the breakfast guests watched the princesses combat the king. It was as if Zidane was staring at Dagger. Standing directly in front of him, fiery as ever, passionate and loving, unwilling to give in. Zidane felt a rush of blood overcome him and in the next moment, his body was swaying. Eiko yelped, leaping to her feet to grab hold of Zidane's arm as he began to fall over. She was unable to stop his impact against the ground. His chest bobbed as he fell across the floor. Doctor Tot was racing down the table as the guests came to their feet.

"Daddy!" Alex screeched at the sight. Quickly, Freya swooped the small princess up into her arms, pulling her back from the scene. Sarah and Bella fell to their knees beside Eiko.

"Grab his arms, keep him still," Eiko directed the princesses. "His temperature is rising again."

"So is his heart rate," Doctor Tot looked up from holding Zidane's wrist. Eiko pressed her hand to his forehead. His bangs had already become sticky to his skin.

"Dammit, Zidane," Eiko whispered, brushing his hair from his face. His body jolted again. With great anguish, Bella and Sarah pressed their weight to his

arms and shoulders. Eiko slapped at his cheek. “Come on, come on, dammit!” Eiko grew impatient as Zidane would not come to.

“Look!” Sarah pointed towards the side of his neck.

Quickly, Doctor Tot tilted Zidane’s head, laying eyes on a vein that was quite a dark green beneath his skin. “That’s the main artery that sends blood to the brain,” Doctor Tot observed, adjusting his bifocals. ‘I’ve never seen a vein turn green before.’ Doctor Tot turned towards Steiner. “Make haste. We must get Zidane to the infirmary. He needs medicine.”

The dining hall fell into sheer chaos.

Zidane’s head was against something divinely soft. He assumed he was in the infirmary, but he couldn’t ever recall being this comfortable. The sounds of tweeting birds reached his ears and he opened his eyes. He realized in that moment that he felt no pain. It was as if his entire body had been completely patched up. His sight, however, was greeted by something that had his heart plummeting in his chest. A grinning girl with porcelain smooth

skin and big dark brown eyes looked at him. Her dark raven locks fell around her heart shaped face, ruffled from a long night's sleep.

"And so the king awakens..." She whispered. Her voice was smooth as silk and made Zidane tremble. 'I do believe the help is going to think we died in our sleep if we don't get up soon.' Her slender arm came out and she pressed herself to his body. Zidane could feel her electrifying touch as her body touched his. Zidane could only stare at her in near disbelief. Everything felt so real. Everything felt so... right. Dagger's hand reached up, gently combing over his cheek. "Did you have a pleasant dream?"

Zidane grabbed her wrist, tenderly bringing his lips to her knuckle. He could smell her intoxicating aroma. His entire body swelled with heat. He knew none of this was real, but he so desperately wanted to believe it was. All of his senses were working. It was the first time he was seeing Dagger in ten years. Hurriedly, as if she would disappear, Zidane wrapped his arms around Dagger, passionately bringing her against him. His fingers curled up in her dark hair and his body shook.

"Zidane?" Dagger pressed her hands to his chest, drawing her eyes back to look at him. "What's

wrong? Are you alright?"

Zidane cupped her cheek. "I love you," Zidane said, almost in a hurry. 'I love you so much. You're my whole world. You're my one and only.' His hands slid down her neck, resting on her curvy and creamy shoulders. "I would do anything to protect you. I would walk across the world for you, Dagger."

"Where is all of this coming from?" Dagger asked, arching her bold brows. She gently stroked his jaw. 'Are you nervous about the baby?' Dagger grinned and Zidane felt his heart leap with excitement. "You know, the nurse said it's always scary with the first one. But it will be fine, you'll see."

Zidane felt his eyes grow wet and again, he brought his hands up to cup her face, tenderly stroking her over and over again. Dagger gripped his wrists, sensing his inner confliction. Tears streaked down Zidane's face as he felt Dagger beneath him for the first time in ten years. Their legs interwined and tangled, just like their destinies. It all felt so real and it hurt Zidane because he knew it wasn't. He knew this couldn't be happening. This all wasn't some bad dream. He reached his hand down,

his heart thundering in his chest as he felt the swell of Dagger's belly against him.

"I understand you're nervous... I am, too," Dagger said, placing her hands atop his. "We've been through so much, though. How could we not handle a baby?"

Zidane's eyelashes fluttered. "It's going to be a girl."

"Mmm, I think it's going to be a boy. The nurses agree because of how the baby sits inside, apparently," Dagger wiped away his salty tears.

"Trust me," Zidane said, running his hands along her smooth skin. "It's a girl."

"Okay," Dagger grinned. 'I trust you, Zidane.' She leaned her head forward, pressing her lips to his. They were still that soft silk he had remembered. It resonated through his body like a wild flame. Zidane held her tenderly as he kissed her. The sensation felt so real. It was exactly how he remembered it. And it sickened him. Their lips parted and Dagger gazed up to Zidane, her fingers running against his collarbone. "Do you trust Kuja?"

Instantly, Zidane tensed, looking to her. “I... don’t think there’s any reason to discuss that.”

“Zidane, he will destroy Alexandria. You have to stop him.”

“Dagger, what are you talking about?” Zidane sat up.

“If you don’t do what he says, he will flatten the entire city. Again.”

Zidane clenched his jaw, his hands curling into fists. “So, what?! I’m supposed to sell out and work for Kuja? I should do his grunt work?”

“Don’t you want to save the one’s you love?”

Zidane stood up, staggering about the room. “Kuja, if you want to talk to me, don’t you dare send my dead wife in to do your negotiating!”

In the blink of an eye, Zidane was ankle deep in ash again. He shook his head as the ash came across his face. Standing before him, in his cocky purple cloak, was Kuja once more. He was grinning, almost like he was amused.

“You’re still holdin’ out on the thought I’m going to work for you, huh?” Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. “What was all that? Some way to break

my psyche down? You're so predictable, Kuja, and your allusions suck. Even I know they're not real."

"Well," Kuja shrugged so nonchalant. "It certainly didn't stop you from nearly making love to her."

"What's your deal now? What do you want?" Zidane asked with a huff.

"Goodness, can you not spare a moment for your brother?" Zidane clenched his jaw, making Kuja grin. "That is my offer. You can work for me or you can give me Princess Arabella. Or... I'll flatten Alexandria, simple as that. I will destroy those souls and recycle souls of Terrans. You've done well populating the city. It will be a generous amount for our cause."

"What if I do one? How can I trust you won't just turn around and pulverize my city?" Zidane held his arms out at his side. "Garland failed for obvious reasons, Kuja. You can't just use another world as your vessel."

"Some Gaians will live, I have come to terms with that," Kuja folded his hands behind his back. "But I can and I will populate the planet with Terrans. Some are born every day now. And I only

grow stronger with each one. There is no stopping what I want, Zidane. Either you can join a quiet, elite, and anonymous force that removes the wretched and replaces them with the divine. Or your daughter can be taught how to be the Goddess of Mass Destruction she is destined to be. Or... you can rot beneath the rubble of your kingdom. It's your choice and I'll make well on whichever it is. Keep that in mind."

All Zidane could see in his mind was Dagger and her words. Don't you want to save the one's you love? Zidane pursed his lips, his eyelashes fluttering as ash drifted by. "No... Dagger wouldn't say that. She would never want me to work for you, Kuja. Why don't you stop being a coward and make an appearance in person? I'm not your mode of message."

"I haven't left the Iifa Tree in seventeen years," Kuja paced a few steps through the thick clumps.

"If you flatten Alexandria, we will flatten the Iifa Tree."

"I'd like to see you get through the magical fortifications around the roots," Kuja smiled, looking over his shoulder at Zidane. 'It would be a pleasure to watch you try. There's only one person

who can break that seal.’ Kuja paused for a moment, taking his time to come closer to Zidane. “Arabella, the Goddess of Mass Destruction.”

Zidane charged towards Kuja, ramming him into the edge of a jagged mountain. Kuja wheezed but quickly began laughing. Zidane clenched his cloak tightly in his hands, holding him firmly against the wall. “That is not her title. Fuck you, Kuja. I don’t want you to ever say her name again, do you understand me?”

“Ah, but she’d be an excellent companion. Bright and inquistive, just as she is in her dreams,” Kuja continued languidly, unworried about being pressed into pointy lava rocks. “I can see a lot of you inside of her, Zidane. If I can’t have her, well, the next best option is you. Which is it?”

Zidane’s grip loosened and he looked at Kuja with hard eyes. “If I... work for you... what’s in it for me?” Zidane asked, nodding his head towards Kuja. He became acutely aware in that moment how silent it was around them.

Kuja grinned. “It will be very secretive, untraceable, I can promise you that. Your friends don’t even have to know you’re a traitor.” Zidane’s body tensed as he looked at Kuja. “There’s just a

special suit you wear and you can have all the power you would like. And I can guarantee Alexandria's safety. You will be immune to any damages that may occur in this process. Your daughter's will remain unharmed."

"Will you tell me how to get this virus out of my body?" Zidane asked.

Kuja tilted his head back and forth. "Maybe. If you prove your loyalty to me." Kuja walked towards the edge of the cliff, looking out towards the dark void that sprawled before them. 'Instructions will be forthcoming. Expect a midnight visit in future days. I suppose you don't have to send Bella to Burmecia, afterall, now.' Kuja laughed when he saw Zidane's face. "It's easy to predict you when I can just... read your mind. We're in agreeance, though, correct? You work for me. I leave your kingdom alone."

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, feeling his insides constrict at the thought. But if it meant keeping Bella safe, Zidane knew he had to do this. He would think of something else, surely. Doctor Tot would be able to remove the virus, he had to have faith.

"Okay, deal," Zidane finally said. "As long as that is the deal."

“Oh, it is,” Kuja nodded. “You’ve chosen wisely, Zidane. I guess I’ll see you soon. Until then.”

Zidane jolted forward, gasping sharply. His shirt had been removed and again, he found himself beneath linens of ice. Zidane coughed profusely, falling onto his elbow. Around him, he found his daughter’s and all the breakfast guests crowding his bed now. Zidane wiped his hair from his sticky face, panting as if he had been underwater for too long.

“Daddy, oh thank goodness,” Sarah came forward to hug her warm father.

Weakly, he wrapped his arm around her, still fighting to control his breath. He fell back against the pillow. “Don’t take Bella to Burmecia...” Zidane shook his head. Alex brought him a glass of water. ‘Kuja knows. He knows everything because of me.’ Zidane sat up again now. “Doctor, please tell me you know some form of medicine I can take?”

“I have none that don’t risk your heart stopping, Zidane. We can control your temperature and provide you with air, but we might not be able to get your heart pumping again if we try.”

“Fine,” Zidane said, swinging his legs to side of his bed. “I’m going to see Kuja.”

“Are you insane?” Eiko furrowed her brow. She pressed her hands to his shoulders and promptly pushed his weak body back into bed. “You can’t just go see Kuja!”

“We’re working an arrangement out,” Zidane looked to her through his messy bangs. “This doesn’t concern you, Eiko. I’m the only one who can fix this.”

“You’re acting ridiculous,” Eiko still prevented him from getting out of bed. “You just said two hours ago that the only way through this was together. You can’t do this alone, Zidane.”

“Well,” Zidane swatted her arms away from him. ‘Give me some time before I let you in on the plan, alright?’ Zidane came to his feet and was slightly unsteady in the moment. “I need to be alone.” He said, briskly leaving the room.

“Princess Eiko, please be patient,” Doctor Tot said, gazing towards the frustrated looking young woman. “Try to understand it’s emotionally taxing for Zidane given the circumstances.”

“He has more to consider than just emotions,” Eiko muttered to herself. “This is war.”

Sarah reached for Beatrix, who had been quiet all morning. She had certainly been mulling about in her mind. And she hadn’t slept well at all the night before. When Sarah touched her, she felt like she reconnected to the planet again, entering the Alexandrian Castle once more.

“Beatrix, I have to help this cause,” Sarah said. “Please, you must let me.”

“There isn’t enough time to teach you sword work,” Beatrix shook her head. “And we cannot send you in not properly trained. You’ll be killed.”

“I already have had my lessons,” Sarah replied, gripping Beatrix’s arm tighter. “Dante taught me. I even have my own sword.”

“You... what?” Beatrix glanced around the room before leading Sarah away from the group. “Dante? Is that... the boy from your birthday party? When was he here? Did Steiner know about this?”

“Actually, I’m proud of how well I kept him off my tail.”

“Well, he never was the best investigator,” Beatrix tilted her head back and forth. “Sarah, this is not to be taken as a joke. People will die. And they will bleed. Cry. Scream. And eventually... perish. Does your father know you have a sword?”

“Not a clue.”

“Your father will never give the OK to allow you in the squadron,” Beatrix shook her head.

“Beatrix, please. What kind of queen will I be one day if I don’t fight for what I believe is right? That’s why the people loved my mother so much, isn’t it? She was willing sacrifice all for her throne. I’m willing to do the same.”

Beatrix pursed her lips for a moment. “I’ll see what I can do... no promises, though.”

20. Changing Tides

Chapter Twenty

The frogs and cicadas chirped loudly that cool night. Zidane had left all his windows open in his chambers as he flopped about in bed like a fish out of water. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Dagger. He could see the faintest of her freckles twinkling at the edge of her round eyes. He could feel her thick eyelashes fluttering against his skin. Kuja had succeeded with his little trick. Allowing Zidane to feel Dagger like that again had him absolutely drained and frustrated that he couldn't have her back. In the outskirts of war, Zidane was angry Kuja had redirected his attention to the cheapest shot he could take; playing with the heart strings of his lost love. Zidane couldn't help but lust over her touch and the desire he had for Dagger became the most unbearable he had fallen victim to in the aftermath of her death. He missed her from the deepest fathoms of his being. What he wouldn't do to have her back again. To hold her in his arms. For her to see the wonderful young women their daughter's were budding into. To help keep him in check and grounded. Without her, he had lost

his anchor and he felt at the mercy of the rolling tides. The pressure mounted deeper and deeper into his core and Zidane sighed, turning in bed to gaze at the empty spot beside him. When Dagger was alive, the bed was only allowed to be drenched in smooth silk. Dagger loved the fabric. But after her death, Zidane insisted on the bare minimal of cotton. The silk burned his skin after she had died. In the beginning, it had been a task coaxing Zidane to return to the chamber where Dagger had taken her last breath. He felt the weight of it all coming in on him. He looked around the dark room, bathed in pale moonlight, trying to force Dagger to appear. Kuja had made her seem so real. Her warm body and smooth skin. Her silky hair and her vibrant eyes. It's like he had truly been holding her again. As if he had transcended through time and life to meet her again. Zidane shuddered at the very thought of Dagger.

The sounds of boots scuffing to stone pricked Zidane's ears and he sat up, looking towards the window. Fauna was climbing in, her red hair glowing in the moonlight. She stopped when she saw Zidane was alert and awake. She grinned. "Good evening, Your Majesty. I didn't expect to find you awake."

Slowly, Zidane came to stand beside his bed. It was quite chilly, however, with the approaching winter, so he grabbed his gray woolen coat off the chest by the end of his bed. As he shrugged into it, he watched Fauna's slender body come completely through the window and she looked around the dark and vacant chambers.

"But a lone little bird locked away in your nocturnal cage," Fauna grinned, walking a few paces around the room. A leather satchel beat against her hip. "All on your own, you wait for the next morning's rays to bring you hope..."

"Just give me what you have and then go," Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, completely unamused.

Fauna turned to him with pursed lips. "Spoil sport..." She muttered before she reached into her satchel, extending a pile of neatly folded black clothes that gleamed in the moonlight pouring through the windows. "Kuja had this made just for you, delicately, and percisely. You'll look sharp in it, I'm sure, my dashing king."

"You can quit it with the goofy talk and formalities," Zidane took the clothes into his hand, a chill coming over him as he felt the cool fabric.

Quickly, he placed the clothes on his nightstand, spying on the sleeve of the form-fitting shirt the outline of a life crystal. He tore his eyes away, looking to Fauna who still seemed amused despite his agitated state.

“Why do you stew, my king?” She asked, coming towards him. Zidane tried to step away, but backed directly into the frame of his bed, nearly falling over. “We must all make hard decisions in our lives. You, of all people, are no stranger to this concept. It’s of better value to make the best of what you have to do.”

“When what I have to do is betray my family and friends?” Zidane looked to her with dark eyes piercing through the night time. “Your little speech would be better wasted on a fool without an option.”

“I believe that’d be you,” Fauna grinned, almost mysteriously, in the pale light of the night. Her gloved hands came forward, caressing against Zidane’s chest, who tensed at the touch. She pressed her hands to his arms. “No wife, left to raise three wretched little girl’s on your own... why do you stay, Zidane? What commands your liberty to them?”

Zidane pressed himself against the bed frame, trying to get away from Fauna's unnerving touch. "Those 'wretched little girl's' are my entire world."

"You've said it yourself," Fauna shrugged. "You never wanted to be a king."

"There's a lot of things I don't want to be," Zidane said, his eyes spying the uniform on his night stand. Fauna glanced over her shoulder and he took that moment to free himself from being pinned against the bed. He walked a few paces. "But if it means keeping my daughter's safe, I have to do it. No matter how much Kuja sickens me."

Fauna's boots scuffed to the polished marble floor, her red hair tumbling over her wiry shoulder. "You're a fool and only have yourself to blame for that. All your life, Zidane, you have done nothing but run from your destiny. You act like a superior man who can outrun it, but you can't. Nobody can deny the fate they were born into, no matter how hard you try to look the other way."

"Don't act like you know me," Zidane kept his back to her, his nerves slowly coming to the surface. "And don't pretend you understand. You can't understand, Fauna. You're a human with a Terran

soul. Your allegiance will never waver. And you have no free will of your own.”

“You and I aren’t much different.”

Zidane turned around, feeling his blood boil beneath his skin. But when he did, nobody was there. Fauna was gone and he was again left to his dark, empty, brooding chambers. Zidane let out an uneven breath as he came to lower himself onto his bed. Cautiously, he took the fabric of the uniform into his hand, slowly unfolding it to reveal his destiny.

Zidane certainly wasn’t the only person not catching a good night’s sleep. In Bella’s chambers, she sat all alone in her bed, propped up against her pillows. Another nightmare had awokened her. She shook nervously in her blankets. Kuja. A name to the face. As she recalled his porcelain skin and ashen hair falling around his shoulders, she couldn’t help but shudder. Bella strived to understand. It was fruitless, however, in her frightened state. She couldn’t piece together the stories she had heard over the years. None of it made sense. What did Kuja want with her family? Why had he made her

father so vehemently sick? Bella couldn't help but still blame herself for all of it. All these people shifting castle to castle, whispering furiously in hallways and departing on airships without even so much as a nap. It seemed that once again the world was up-rooted into turmoil. And Bella felt like she was the embodiment of it.

I've already lost Mother... Bella cast her eyes down, following the shadows that fell across her bedsheets. I was too young to change that. But... I can't sit here and let my own father slip through my fingers. She pursed her lip and furrowed her brow. Bella dug deep into her memories, trying to procure an image of her mother. It was so difficult, however. Her memories of her mother were often white washed, with a beaming sun coming over her shoulder and obscuring her face. All Bella really could remember was her voice. But the young girl worried that, with time, that would fade, too.

"I can't let her legacy just die," Bella whispered to herself. She pulled herself from bed, going to her amoir and quickly dressing. She chose the plainest of dresses she owned, as to not attract attention. It was a long sleeve light blue cotton dress with white lace accenting the cuffs, skirt, and collar. She rolled black stockings up her legs to keep the chill of the

descending winter away. She then shrugged into a heavy woolen coat, buttoning it up, and laced a pair of boots. With shaking hands, the young girl snagged a few dresses down and stuffed them into a backpack she had. It had once been her father's in his youthful worldly travels. It was a worn dark blue with several patches affixed to it. She also balled more stockings up, dropping them into the bag. A few books were collected and a hand mirror that had once been her mother's. Bella turned it over in her hands, running her fingers along the intricate carvings on the back meant to resemble rolling waves and collectible sea shells. Bella pursed her lips and quickly jammed it into her bag. "Have it your way, Kuja..." She muttered to herself as she fought the zippers shut. "If you won't leave my father alone, I'll make sure to it that you do."

Bella knew she'd need food for her journey. In her dream, Kuja had made his hideaway seem so far away. She knew she would have a long travel across the Mist Continent. And then she would need to cross an ocean. From there, she expected an even longer foot travel across the Forgotten Continent to find Kuja's place. But it was too risky to be seen by the night time patrol. A princess fully dressed with a backpack on at two in the morning? The guards

would sound the alarm. Bella pushed her window open and was greeted with a cold gusty breeze of air that fluffed her skirt up. Cautiously, the slender princess leaned out the window, lowering her leg down to a ledge. Her heart thundered in her chest as she looked down at the spiraling fall. The wind ripped through her hair and made her eyes water as carefully, she began to navigate herself along the carved balustrades and ledges of the castle. It was quite a daring escape, but the princess was so distraught with the world and her father, that she saw this as the only way. She couldn't allow these people to fight on her behalf. In many ways, she felt like she was the only person who could stop this. Seeing her father's head hit the ground and watching his body jolt had filled her with a new definition of dread. It was much more exacerbated than the dread she had felt since Sarah's birthday all those weeks and months ago. Bella was determined to prove she could clean her own messes up. And she wouldn't take kindly to someone tarnishing her mother's legacy. Just as Sarah was fired up, Bella had her own personal mission. If Kuja wanted her, then so be it. She wouldn't allow anyone else to sacrifice themselves for her own mistakes.

Her foot slipped and Bella gasped sharply, clinging tightly to the ledge above her. She pressed herself to the cool stone of the castle and hurriedly brought her foot back to the edge. For a moment, she took in deep breaths as the wind continued to ravage against her. After a few beats, she continued to scoot along the edge. Cautiously, she lowered herself down to the next ledge. And then the next. She spiralled around the castle as she slowly found herself reaching the bottom. Wanting to feel the planet beneath her, she leapt and staggered to the ground, falling on her knees. The garden was very dark that night and the rustling foliage set Bella's nerves on edge. She pressed herself into the shadows as she navigated out of the garden. The river that night had a ghastly fog rising from it and it curled around Bella's ankles as she hurried down to the empty gondola. Looking all around for just a moment, the young princess hobbled into the gondola that rocked back and forth precariously. She grabbed the oar and with all her might, pushed herself from the stairs. As she sailed across the muggy surface of the calm river, she looked towards the tall and mighty Alexandrian Castle. Her home. Her entire world as she knew it. Her stomach tossed and turned in turmoil at what she was doing. She knew by morning, the castle would be in havoc at

the discovery of her disappearance. But Bella knew it had to be this way. After seeing her father awaken in the infirmary, begging for her not to be taken away, and swearing to come up with a plan, Bella knew she couldn't wait a moment more for Kuja to play his deadly tricks. Her father had always been the one saving her. This time, Bella wanted to save him.

The gondola ran up against the uneven marble stairs on the other side of the river and Bella hurriedly clambered out. She took one more glance at the castle before she disappeared into Alexandria.

Zidane hadn't slept all night as he contemplated his chat with Fauna and he stewed over the idea of working for Kuja. He knew he had to do it for the safety of his daughter's. But something still held him back. What if Kuja was just lying again? Then Zidane would be a betrayer without a cause. He would go down infamously in history after being the very savior of the history books themselves. He knew he would have explaining to do to Eiko that morning at breakfast. As the sun began to break into his chambers, he could only sigh as the idea of his morning meal being more of an interrogation. He

dressed quickly, hoping to be in the dining room with bright eyes and a bushy tail for the girl's. There was no shooing away the tensity and uncertainty that stewed inside the castle walls. But he knew he still had to try for his daughter's, to make sure they were the least worried for their safety. And his.

When he emerged from his chambers and came to the first platform, a shrill shouting caught his attention and he felt himself freeze. Zidane heard several doors opening. Furious screaming. Feet stamping to the carpet. Quickly, Zidane turned and dashed up those stairs, his heart pounding in his chest. The shouting was coming from his daughter's chambers. Zidane felt a chill come over him as he rounded the corner to find three maids absolutely beside themselves, scurrying up and down the hallways.

“What’s going on!?” Zidane asked, nearly breathless. Sarah and Alex stood in the door of their chambers. Sarah’s face was stone hard. Alex was in tears. Upon seeing her father, she raced towards him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Bella’s gone!” Alex nearly screeched. Zidane felt his entire body blanche.

“What?” Zidane said, nearly numb.

“What if Kuja took her?!” Alex was inconsolable as the tears fell. Sarah came to her side, wrapping her arms around her younger sister as their father stood there, utterly shocked. Zidane was still reeling, his mind running through all the scenarios.

“She didn’t leave a note,” Sarah told him as Alex’s tears soaked her dress. “And there wasn’t a struggle in her room. Some of her dresses are missing. And her window was open.”

Zidane felt his hands curl into fists and he pursed his lips. “Dammit. Dammit all!” Zidane whirled around, racing back down the stairs. Sarah watched, nearly stunned. She also felt the presence of anger welling up into the pit of her stomach and she tightly gripped Alex’s shoulders as the young princess sobbed and hiccuped.

“Alex,” Sarah knelt down. “You should go take a bath and wash your face.”

“But... Bella...!” Alex hiccuped.

“Chin up,” Sarah said firmly. “Now is not the time for tears. Maid, please take her away.” Sarah briskly walked a few steps towards where her father disappeared as the maids, in their fervorous desire to make things right, coaxed the crying young Alex

away, whose tail nearly drooped on the floor behind her. Sarah didn't wait a moment more before she also dashed away in her father's footsteps.

She thundered down the stairs, not even bothering to pick her skirt up. Down and down again she piled until she appeared on the final platform for the grand foyer of the castle. There, she found her father with Eiko, Steiner, and Beatrix. The group was frantically speaking. Several knights and guards lined the edges of the foyer, awaiting their emergency orders.

"Where is she!?" Sarah demanded, not even caring if she interrupted. The adults of the room noticed the rather fiery princess on the platform, but nobody said a word. Sarah came down the stairs now, her heels echoing through the foyer. "Eiko, what did you do!?"

"Princess Sarah..." Eiko stepped forward.

"There's no time for formalities!" Sarah barked. Beatrix and Steiner could see the inner Zidane unleashing from the girl's body. She was angry. She wanted answers. "Where did my sister go!?"

Eiko glanced towards Zidane, pursing her lips. "We believe she is going to Kuja at Iifa Tree."

“Then what are we waiting for!?” Sarah threw her arms out at her side, turning to the soldiers waiting. “Fire the airships up and take to the sky! Everyone is way too calm about this. A princess is *missing!*”

“We’ve already deployed a fleet of foot soldiers to comb the town and surrounding area,” Beatrix told her as calmly as possible. Inside, the general was anything but. “Perhaps she hasn’t gotten too far yet. It’s too foggy to fly, however. We will have to wait until later this morning.”

“I don’t accept that answer.”

“Sarah,” Zidane pressed a hand to her tense shoulder. Sarah pulled away from it, however, a fire searing in her blue eyes. “You should stay with Alex. She’s upset.”

“Upset?! Of course she’s upset!” Sarah shook her head. “Eiko’s made Bella feel so bad about herself, she’s probably just giving herself up to Kuja to save everyone the hassle. We have to stop her!”

“We *are* going to stop her, I promise,” Zidane said, feeling his cool slowly coming undone.

Sarah’s eyes darted between the adults and she ground her teeth together. “Well, I don’t see anyone

doing a *damn* thing!"

Before anyone could reply, the princess turned sharply on her feet, pounding back up the many staircases to her bedroom chambers. Luckily, nobody followed her. She was sure she was leaving a steaming path behind her as she barged into the sitting room. Alex was still away with the maids. Sarah dropped to her knees, rustling her duffel bag out from beneath the couch. She glanced out the window at the awakening sky, spying the rolling fog that enveloped the cliffside city. Taking in a deep breath, Sarah withdrew the long shiny sword from its sheath. It was so sharp and the garnet faithfully gleamed in the dewey morning light. Without hesitation, she wrangled the sheath around across her chest. With the sword beating against her back, she left her room and reappeared in the foyer.

"All of you," Sarah pointed to the left side of the awaiting soldiers. "You're coming with me."

"Sarah?" Zidane turned now, watching as she came down the stairs. The soldiers were slightly confused and a little unnerved. Some took cautious steps to follow in the wake of the demanding and angry princess. 'What... what are you doing?'

Zidane leapt in front of her. “Where did you get that sword?!”

“It’s mine,” Sarah said, plainly. “And I know how to use it. I’m taking my infantry and we’re going to the outskirts of Evil Forest. With any luck, Bella hasn’t crossed the mountain range to Burmecia yet. I’ll go all the way to Burmecia by foot if I have to.”

“Princess Sarah, we have the situation under control,” Eiko said. “This isn’t necessary.”

“Nothing has been under control since you’ve decided to play a bigger role in Bella’s life,” Sarah said, steely and cold. Eiko was rather taken aback. “My sister is out there. She needs to be brought back before she falls into the hands of Kuja. Now, get out of my way.”

“Zidane!” Beatrix interjected, looking to him for help.

At the call of his name, he felt a sharp pain come into his head. Zidane cringed, his brow furrowing together. He grasped his forehead as the pain seared into his mind. He ground his teeth together as the pressure built in his head. And just as quick, it left. Zidane’s head throbbed as he lifted his eyes to Sarah.

“Let her go,” Zidane said.

“Zidane?!” Beatrix shook her head.

Sarah turned to the soldiers waiting behind her.
“Follow me.”

“Zidane, what are you thinking?!” Beatrix came towards him, noticing an odd light in his eyes. “Are you even thinking at all!? We can’t send her out there. She’s not trained to lead a troop. We don’t even know how well she excels with a sword.”

Zidane watched as Sarah flung the door open, the racket of shifting armor following in her wake. He watched his oldest daughter’s head bob from sight before he turned without a word, heading back up the stairs.

“Zidane!” Beatrix shouted, walking after him. “Zidane, this is no time to be careless or conceding. This is an emergency. With one princess missing, we are in danger of more going missing. You have to keep the girl’s here—”

“I know what I’m doing,” Zidane said, not even looking over his shoulder. Beatrix stopped abruptly at the base of the stairs, watching Zidane walk away as if he was cool and collected. Zidane arrived at his chambers and paced a few moments. Slowly, he

came to his nightstand, pulling the wretched uniform into his hands. He pursed his lips, however, discarding it into a rumpled mess. Zidane lowered himself to the edge of the bed. “Well, Kuja... I think you and I should have a chat.”

There was only a beat of unmoving silence before the king felt himself become overwhelmed with the familiar burning sensation. He collapsed across his bed, drifting into a fevered state as he transcended from his body to the man he wanted six feet below his own misery.

21. You Reap What You Sow

Chapter Twenty-One

The curt shrill bell rang out as Sarah found herself entering a familiar shop floor. Sarah's heels echoed against the creaky wooden panes as she maneuvered between the shelves of shoes. She glanced towards the wall at the many swords, saddles, and armor Dante had constructed. Sarah paused by the counter, looking over the painting of Dante's family that proudly hung on the back wall of the store, showing all that shopped there whose hands had delicately made their fashion. She tensed as her eyes reviewed every detail of Dante's sisters and parents. She pursed her lips, wondering if she had made a mistake. Through the front shop windows, she saw her rather confused team of soldiers talking amongst themselves and glancing up and down the alley.

"Just one moment, I'm on my way!" She heard echo from the backroom. Sarah considered momentarily just dashing out the door. But her eyes remained glued to the family portrait and soon enough, Lucen appeared, untying his apron

hurriedly. He stopped when he saw Princess Sarah, immediately falling into a bow. “Princess Sarah, how wonderful it is to see you!”

“I need to speak to Dante, urgently,” Sarah said, tearing her eyes away from the portrait.

Grimly, Lucen looked to the sword on her back and gestured towards the open door behind him. “He’s in the iron forge in the back.”

“Thank you,” Sarah said, somewhat short of breath. She began to press past him, when he placed a hand to her shoulder, stopping her. Sarah looked over her shoulder at the rather uneasy Lucen, who licked his lips and contemplated his words.

“Are we going to war, Your Highness?” He asked in a hushed tone so as not to upset the women. Sarah was quiet, however. “If you’re here to draft my boy... just make he doesn’t try to be a hero, alright? He’s my only son.”

Sarah’s blue eyes pierced Lucen and after a moment of hesitation, she nodded. “His life will be well placed, I promise.”

He managed a weak grin, though neither of them believed the words Sarah had spoken. She tore away from him and briskly passed through the main

sewing room. After a curt knock, she entered the room in the back of the store that was hot enough to break an instant sweat across Sarah's brow. She pressed the door shut behind her, feeling herself fall against it. There was Dante with his back to her. A long pair of calipers reached into the swelling forge that he dutifully worked over.

"Father, if it's the man here for his Chocobo shoes, tell him five days time was the deal, I can't work any fas..." Dante paused as he turned and saw Sarah. Between them, a red hot ingot dangled precariously from Dante's tools. Upon meeting Dante's dark eyes, the color of the sweetest Lindblum chocolate, all of Sarah's hurried anger ultimately drooped into a sorrow. 'Sarah,' Dante set his work down, almost clumsily. "What are you doing here? What's happened?"

Sarah let out a sigh, pushing away from the door and coming just a few steps closer. She folded her hands together in front of her chest. "My sister has gone missing, Dante. She is in grave danger. I know where's she going so I'm... going after her."

"Going after her?" Dante echoed, arching his eyebrows. "But that's why you have soldiers. You shouldn't be rushing ahead of them."

“I’m too impatient to sit and wait for them to act,” Sarah shook her head. “Dante, you of all people should understand how severe this situation is. You know what my father’s been going through... you know what the world reckoned with all those years ago. We cannot sit here and actively deny we don’t know what’s going on. I see things crystal clear now after what I saw happen to my father yesterday, Dante. I have to do this. I have to find Bella. I have to protect her for my mother and my father.”

“Where is she going?” Dante asked, his face softening.

“The Outer Continent,” Sarah glanced towards the window that was wet from the smoke and steam of the forge. “To a large tree called the Iifa Tree. The supposed beginning of Gaia.”

“It’s too dangerous, Sarah,” Dante surged towards her, taking hold of her arms. “Something could happen to you out there. And... what would become of Alexandria if you’re not there to take the throne as our queen?”

“I’d rather die trying to save my sister than sit here and wait for my crown,” Sarah told him defiantly. “My father is *not* going to die anytime

soon. I have to do this, Dante. I've come here to ask if you would go with me?"

"You want me... to go with you...?"

"With any luck, if we're quick, we can find her before she gets to Burmecia and onwards to the Northern Ports," Sarah said. "Will you do it, Dante?"

The young man gazed around his workshop seemingly vacant. He blinked rapidly and looked towards Sarah, nodding gently. "I'll go with you, Sarah."

The princess grinned and let out a sigh of relief. She reached forward for his hands, tenderly encasing them between her tangled fingers. "Thank you. For this, I shall see that you're knighted of the highest honor."

Dante smiled for a brief moment before glancing down at Sarah. "You're not going wearing *that*, are you? Heels? On hilly grass? No way. And this dress will inhibit your legs."

"I, uh... I wasn't quite taking everything into account when I left the castle," Sarah said, tugging at the lacy collar of the olive satin dress. "The only thing I care about is finding Bella."

“Well, you won’t catch up very fast when you break your ankles in those shoes,” Dante laughed, wandering towards a large wardrobe squeezed against the back wall of the forge. “I have some things in here that should fit you. Just some things I’ve made for fun.”

Sarah grinned as he pulled a pair of pleated dark green pants out. The pleating was clean and well done, fashionably chosen with a mustard yellow thread that gleamed in the dreary light of the forge. Next he handed her a cotton shirt with long loose sleeves. The collar was to be laced together with black ribbon. Off the bottom shelf, Dante presented Sarah with knee high leather boots that sported leftover belts from his other projects. Dante then reached for a box jammed onto the top shelf of the wardrobe, holding it low for Sarah to see. She pushed amongst the bulky leathers, lifting a pad with strapping.

“Bracers. For your wrists, shoulders, knees... you know, the weak spots,” Dante shrugged.

“Goodness,” Sarah huffed as Dante handed a few leather bracers towards her. “It’s like dressing up and playing make believe.”

“You’ll be thanking me when something more mean and unrelenting challenges you out there,” Dante told her pointedly, gathering his own clothes up. “There’s a water closet behind the ladder over there. You can change there.”

“Alright,” Sarah walked a few paces and paused. She glanced towards Dante who was already hurriedly unbuttoning his sweaty tunic. Sarah clutched her homemade clothes tightly. “Thank you,” She said, very softly, before she squeezed behind the ladder and into the closet.

The castle garden was teeming with guests. The loud cry of violins, trumpets, and percussion rang out amongst the party guests laughter and hoots of delight. Long tables covered in pale blush pink linens sported decadent treats. Chocolate mousse, strawberries coated in white chocolate, toffee, peanut brittle— all the treats one could so divinely crave. Pink carnations and white drapes decorated the garden, giving the mild autumn afternoon a breath of fresh air. Waiters darted amongst the people, offering champagnes, ales, and wines of all choosings. It was shaping up to be a splendid afternoon.

Zidane found himself alone, however, in an aisle of hedges nobody lingered. He was wearing that crisp black suit that was always itchy. With the white button up that had the most annoying buttons to fumble with. A vibrant red bow tie lie crooked at the collar of his shirt. He smoked a cigarette languidly, casting grim looks at the party carrying on beside him. He exhaled heavily, sending a plume of smoke into the air. He tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette, pursing his lips as he watched the nobles chuckle and speak behind their lacy gloves.

He tried to keep his eyes averted from the weary scenery that carried on around him. Zidane simply tried to be patient and keep his cool... But a nearby obnoxious laugh and snort from a snooty Treno resident had him tensing all over again. The atmosphere washed over his skin, coaxing him to relax and enjoy the happiest occasion Alexandria: the first birthday of the princess. But Zidane didn't want to relive this memory. Not like this. Not so painfully real. Zidane would never confess to it, but Kuja's allusions were quite convincing. And Zidane shivered at the thought of Kuja being able to read his mind so well. Maybe Kuja knew Zidane better than he knew himself?

Zidane shook that thought away, taking another drag of his cigarette. He glanced down the empty cobblestone path, his eyes darted to each rock in the path. Each was so diversely different, but unanimously came together to make a clean and full path that was pretty to the sight. So much care and detail Dagger put into rebuilding the castle, to make it better than even its former glory; the perfect kingdom she wanted to leave to her first born, Sarah. Zidane's shoulders drooped as he exhaled his smoke.

“There you are!” Slender fingers came to grasp his arms and Zidane almost couldn’t bear the sight. Dagger’s face filled his vision. Her clear skin was so radiant in the fresh afternoon sun. Her long dark hair had been pulled back into a braid that began at the nape of her neck. Her cheekbones glimmered with modest rouge and her brown eyes sparkled. She was wearing a formal blue evening gown that flowed the length of her slender body and had gold embellishments along the cuffs and hems. ‘What are you doing hiding over here? People are asking to see you.’ Dagger tugged at his arm and he looked at her, so desperately wanting to give in, but he remained rooted in spot, watching his ribbon of smoke dissipate from his cigarette. Dagger’s face

softened and she reached up, combing his hair from his face. “What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

Zidane cast his eyes down. “I’d like to just stay over here for a while... I’ll catch up in a bit, alright?”

“We’ll be blowing out candles soon,” Dagger glanced over her shoulder. “Is this about Sarah turning one? I know, times does fly...”

“Dagger,” Zidane looked into her eyes. How deeply he wanted to believe he was really looking at her. How he wished from the fathoms of his soul that she was real and tangible. “I just need a moment. You’re a much better sight for sore eyes, anyway. Go chat ’em up for me.”

“Oh, Zidane, sometimes I really do wonder what’s going on up there,” She tenderly stroked his temple. After a moment, she turned and walked away. Zidane rustled free from the hedges, turning to watch her disappear back into the crowds that had gathered to celebrate the first heir to the throne of Alexandria. He bit down on his lip and flicked his cigarette away, jamming his hands into his pockets.

“You know, for someone who’s aware none of this is real, you still do work so hard to treat her as you

would were she alive,” Came a voice from behind Zidane.

The king pursed his lips together, slowly turning to see the ever perky and petulant Kuja. “Yeah, well... the difference is I have a soul.”

Kuja grinned. “Is that comment supposed to break my poor black heart?”

“Look, I’m not here to do some little dance with you,” Zidane said sharply. “Where is my daughter?”

“Oh, she’s not with you?” Kuja withheld a curt laugh. “Well, that may mean she’s come to her senses and taken my advice. Perhaps the little one actually does have it in her. You know, you don’t give her enough credit, Zidane.”

“How could you do this?” Zidane hissed, curling his hands into fists. “You guilted her into doing this. You probably had her worried sick I’d be killed if she didn’t give into your commands. I guess scum like you never can stay dead.”

“Actually,” Kuja folded his hands behind his back. “It’s people like you that can’t keep me dead.”

“Enough with the mind games and fancy talk,” Zidane shook his head. “I’m too exhausted to keep up with your rhetoric.”

“Oh, little golden boy. There’s so much you’ve never realized about yourself. About your own potential,” Kuja slowly paced, reaching out to touch the delicate carnations grown just for Sarah’s celebration. ‘Some would argue I’m the failed attempt as a reputable Angel of Death. And that you... are the perfect one.’ Kuja’s eyes flickered towards Zidane and he felt himself shiver beneath his dress coat. “Garland designed me with a fixed lifespan, but only at one defining moment: when you are stronger than me. Should you fail as the perfect Angel of Death, never to out-perfect the fatal flaw, I shall never die. And as time waned on, it seems, Zidane, that you have failed your task.” Kuja grinned and came towards Zidane, grabbing his arm and turning him to gaze down the shaded aisle of hedges. Straight ahead in the open plaza of guests, Dagger, in her stunning blue dress, held the small and pudgy Princess Sarah in her arms. “Your strength was always a ticking bomb...” Kuja said gently. Moment by moment, Zidane became more tense as his eyes followed Dagger. “It was always sorely misplaced, defined in one principle that

would never be tangible. And when she finally died... well, you died with her, too, Zidane. Your name should be on that headstone. Because they buried you that day, as well.”

Zidane ground his teeth together, pulling away from Kuja. He tore his eyes from the sight of Dagger, walking towards the hedges and focusing on the gentle pink flowers. Kuja smiled, watching Zidane’s inner turmoil unfold.

“Your hopes and dreams and desires— your innate gift to be a human,” Kuja continued, while Zidane felt a pressure building beneath his skull. “You lost all of that the day she took her final breath. Without her, is this family worth fighting for, Zidane?”

“Enough!” Zidane found himself bellowing at the top of his lungs. When he opened his eyes, the ash of Terra greeted him once more. Distantly, the sound of molten lava could be heard. Zidane turned towards Kuja with a fire in his eyes. “I took a deal from you. If I work for you, you leave Bella alone. If she turns up at the Iifa Tree, I want you to transport her back to Alexandria.”

“She’s old enough to make her own choices,” Kuja replied, folding his hands behind his back.

“You can’t be the King of her heart forever, Zidane. As a young adult, you, yourself, made difficult choices and sacrifices. It’s Arabella’s decision to make. It’s her destiny.”

*“She is **not** destined to be the creater of Mass Destruction,” Zidane hissed. “She cried when she found out a carriage ran over an oglop. You’ll never make her do what you want.”*

“A person with an open mind and an accepting heart will find a way,” Kuja grinned, shaking the ash away from his hair. “And her destiny became sealed the day of her mother’s death which so happens to coincide with the fall of her father.”

Zidane’s hands curled into fists. “If you allow her to go through with this choice, knowing full well it’s avoidable, then our deal is off, Kuja. I will declare full-on war with you. And I will stop at nothing to get Bella back.”

Kuja smiled. “I love when you get fiesty and worked up. It really brings the conversation to life. Quite a bold statement. An empty, far fetched, and sad one, at that. You’re wasting your time, really. You get weaker by the day, Zidane. This time, I don’t think there will be any catching up.”

Zidane was about to respond when Kuja reached forward, giving Zidane one single push. The king staggered backwards, falling over the cliff and into the dark abyss below.

The late afternoon was waning into evening. The sky was breaking out into a variety of sherbets. Up ahead on the gravel path, a wooden sign was visible. Upon seeing it, Bella picked up her pace, her dusty boots beating to the path. She was rather winded and had a headache from not eating all day. Her feet throbbed horrendously and she knew she needed to find somewhere to sleep for the night. She found herself taking the Eastern Highway from Alexandria, but she hadn't encountered many people on her route. The onset of winter made it an unpopular time to travel and many caravans stuck to the southern roads that took them to the warmer Lindblum. Around Bella stretched vast plains. Farms dotted the landscapes. Daisies, tulips, and petunias sprouted along the path. Bella raced towards the sign, letting out a breath as she finally got close enough to read it.

Alexandria — 56km

Burmecia — 157km

Even after fourteen hours of walking, ravenously thirsty and hungry, Bella felt like she hadn't made much progress. She let out a huff, nervously gripping at her backpack straps. She looked across the empty quiet plains, a cold breeze rushing around her. It would be night soon. Bella knew it wouldn't be safe to travel alone. She desperately wanted to lay her head down somewhere warm, as well. The young princess let out a sigh, continuing in the way of the arrows on the sign. She would find somewhere to shelter, she convinced herself. She busied her mind by kicking rocks along the path. Though she wanted the tiring journey to end, the final destination had her unnerved. In many ways, Bella still felt like a young child that didn't completely understand what they were getting themselves into. But she wanted to believe she was doing this for the safety and security of her family. Her father had been through so much, Bella thought it was her turn to do something. Especially if it meant protecting everything her mother had loved. Maybe her father would never accept this and blame himself—but Bella thought it would be much better than having him live through torment just to keep her safe. She couldn't feign ignorance her entire life.

She had to pull herself up by her bootstraps as her own parents did at the call of their destiny.

I'm sorry, Daddy... I really am, Bella thought to herself, watching as the last of the sun began to sink behind the vast mountain range. You might not agree... but I'm sure things weren't black and white in your childhood, either. You have always told me I have to make choices for myself. This is my choice, if it means you and Sarah and Alex will be safe... I always was the black sheep of the family. Maybe it should have been me instead of Mother, so you could have been the perfect family...

The sound of a ringing windchime caught Bella's attention and she paused on the path, gazing over an uneven wooden fence and spying a farm tucked against the base of the mountains. There was a modest cabin that had a torch burning gently against the oncoming darkness on the porch. Nearby was a big red barn and the door hadn't been completely shut. Carefully, Bella came to the fence, gripping the worn and decaying posts. Her dark eyes gazed across the open fields, spying the empty furrows that had been harvested in the nick of time. There wasn't a stir or the sight of another living creature. Bella squeezed her lanky body through the fence, causing it to wobble back and forth. She staggered onto the

property and hurried across towards the barn. Her backpack beat against her as she wildly out ran the idea of being caught. Bella worried someone may recognize her and inform the authorities. Or even worse, they'd take her trespassing as a symbol of violence rather than refuge.

Bella squeezed through the barn door and was relieved to find it was warm from the torches mounted on the walls. Bella hugged herself, ruffling her woolen coat as she crept further into the barn, hopeful to find a place to sleep that obscured her from view. She told herself she'd be out before dawn tomorrow. Hopefully they would never be aware of her presence. There was a scuff to the barn floor and Bella gasped sharply, holding her hands out in front of her.

“Kwe-eh!”

Bella relaxed, her eyes becoming wide as saucers. Cautiously, she came closer and the chocobo became more clear. It was so tall, Bella had to crane her neck back to gawk at his protruding orange beak. He ruffled his golden feathers, scraping its feet again to the ground. Its big blue eyes looked to the young princess.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Bella whispered, pressing her hands to her chest. “I’m just going to lay down behind those crates... don’t mind me...” She walked a few paces away from the chocobo and it did not react. Carefully, she trudged around two large crates containing chocobo food. There was some hay stowed behind the crates to Bella’s surprise. She used her backpack as a pillow and let out a sigh as she closed her eyes.

The cicadas and frogs chirped loudly through the thin barn walls.

Nighttime had descended across Alexandria. Zidane sat alone at the large dining hall table. He pressed a linen cloth full of ice to his head as he leaned over an unappetizing cup of coffee. Alex was absolutely inconsolable at the fact Bella *and* Sarah were gone. And he knew Beatrix was furious at him for allowing Sarah to take six men and leave on her own accord. She took Knights of Pluto, however. And Zidane knew Sarah was mindful of her surroundings and probably wouldn’t go far. Half-way to Burmecia, tops, before she turned around begging for an airship. He couldn’t help, however, the wretched feeling of anxiety that riddled him with

the idea of two of his daughter's gone. How could they let this happen?

His temple throbbed sharply and he ground his teeth together, adjusting the linen on his head. A moment later, he could hear boots to the floor and he looked up with his glazed tired eyes to see Beatrix standing at the side of the table. She, herself, was rearing the ugly head of fatigue, as well. Beatrix hadn't even worn powder or rouge that day. She looked as utterly drained as Zidane.

"Anything?" Zidane croaked.

"The troops that took the Western and Southern Highways report no sightings 16 kilometer's out. We haven't heard from the Eastern Highways, however."

"Is that Sarah's troop?"

"Yes. Airship personnel reported sighting her troop on the Eastern Highways. She has yet to send someone back to report. Perhaps by morning," Beatrix said, trying to hold in a yawn.

Zidane pursed his lips. "We should all get some sleep. With daylight maybe comes clarity. We should call on Lindblum to patrol the skies, too. Meet our people halfway so we cover more ground.

There's a lot of open plains she has to cross to get to Burmecia. We'll spot her."

"Preparations shall be made in the morning," Beatrix nodded.

Zidane sighed and stood, discarding his linen on the table beside his now cold coffee. Together, he and Beatrix walked towards the grand foyer, spying the large moon through the circular glass above the door. "At least there's plenty of moonlight so it's not too dark..."

"We're going to bring them both home, Zidane," Beatrix tenderly pressed a hand to his shoulder. "The girl's are stronger than you think. They're survivors, just like their mother, just like their father."

Zidane glanced around the empty foyer, nodding in a rather empty fashion. "Good night, Beatrix." The defeated king quietly began up the stairs, running his hands along the familiar smoothness of the railing. How many times he had gripped that railing. He had done it when teaching his girl's how to climb stairs. When he had been announced with Dagger. So many memories just from touching something as simple as a railing. He felt like it was all slipping away from him. He was the sower of his own misery.

He found himself outside the sitting chambers of the princesses rooms. Carefully, Zidane pushed the door open. The room was still lit, but nobody occupied it. Briskly, he crossed towards Alex's room, and a noise started to be heard. He peaked through the ajar door to see a music box was opened on Alex's vanity. A debutaunte in a long flowing white dress twirled about, singing a delicate tune. A few candles were lit on the surfaces to keep the room warmly glowing. Zidane came through the door now to see Alex laying in bed, stroking a doll she had that resembled her mother. She cocked her head up when she heard Zidane's stirs.

"Are they back?!" She sat up quickly. Zidane sorely shook his head and Alex sighed, frustratedly, and laid back down. "Sarah and Bella are selfish!"

"Hey now, that's not fair to say," Zidane came towards the bed now and laid down beside Alex, propping himself up on the pillows and threading his fingers across his stomach. "People do things that we may not understand in the moment, but that doesn't mean they're bad people, Alex. Your sister's aren't trying to hurt you. They're just doing what they think is right."

“But you don’t think it’s right,” Alex pointed out, her big brown eyes gazing up at her father.

Zidane sighed and pursed his lips. “Yes, but it’s not my life, is it? I can’t tell you girls what to do forever. I might not agree, but sometimes that can’t stop someone, Alex.” The young princess kept her eyes trained down on her doll, tenderly pushing its black hair around. Zidane wrapped his arm around her, pulling her against him. He ran his fingers through her curly blonde hair. “Everything’s going to be alright, Alex. Everyone will come home, I promise. We’ll figure things out.”

“I just want things to be normal again,” The young princess bemoaned into her father’s chest. She then lifted her big curious eyes to him. “You know, I think Sarah is going to marry Dante.”

Zidane grinned at the lightheartedness of the suggestion as he loving looked down at his daughter’s round rosy face that glowed warmly orange in the candlelight. “Yeah,” Zidane chuckled. “Maybe she will. But that’s up to her.”

“Oh, but, Daddy, they have to!” Alex declared. “With a love story like their’s, it’s meant for books. Dante scaling the castle walls to teach Sarah how to fight with a sword. Making her her own sword, too!

And—” She paused when she saw her father’s amused, surprised look. “Oh, I wasn’t supposed to tell you any of that...”

Zidane could only laugh, pulling his daughter in for a tight hug. “It doesn’t matter, my little monkey. We should go to sleep.”

“Will you read me a story first?” Alex asked.

“Alright,” Zidane nodded, glancing around the room. “Which one?”

Alex leaned over the side of her bed, reaching amongst a clutter of toys she kept an arm lengths away. With some trouble, she lifted a leather bound book up, handing it to Zidane. He turned it over in his hands and sighed as he laid his eyes on the title: *I Want to be Your Canary*.

“Sarah and Bella say they remember Momma reading it to them,” Alex said as she settled back in beside her father, clutching her doll close. She leaned her head against his shoulder. “I want to have memories of you reading it to me.”

Zidane smiled as he ran his hand along the textured surface of the book. He could almost hear the cries of the audience and the slightly out-of-tune Tantalus band from the balcony. Zidane flipped the

book open to the first page, the smell of crumbly, waxy papers wafting past his nose.

“This is a story that takes place long, long ago. Our heroine, Princess Cornelia, is torn from her lover, Marcus. She attempts to flee the castle, only to be captured by her father, King Leo. When our story begins, Marcus, having heard this, crosses swords with the king...”

22. Taking Flight

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sounds of hissing dragonflies and crickets filled Bella's ears. As she opened her eyes, she couldn't help but jolt forward. The hay beneath her crinkled, caught in her hair and stuck to her heavy coat. It was daylight outside. She had overslept. Bella's eyes darted around the rafters of the quiet barn. But she froze when she spied a silver tray nearby. It had a piece of toast with butter in a rammican and a mound of scrambled eggs. A tall glass of milk sat beside it was that was foamy and quite inviting. Bella made no move towards it, however. Hurriedly, she began brushing the hay from her clothes and shaking her hair out. She pulled her backpack over her shoulder and carefully came out from behind the crates. But she found herself abruptly halting when she saw a farmer in the barn.

It was an older man, who wore overalls and had skin so tanned, it could have been leather. Wispy white hair fell from beneath his wide brim straw hat. He was tending to his chocobo, using a bristled brush to comb through his feathers. The chocobo

craned it's neck with delight. When he saw the meek Bella standing there, he offered a friendly smile. Bella, however, was still extremely frightened. She hugged herself, trying to conceal her face.

“You should eat your breakfast, little lady,” He advised with a voice that crinkled from years of smoking. “I imagine you’re quite hungry and thirsty. Don’t be shy. Go on, eat up.”

Bella looked at him with wide brown eyes that mimicked a beast caught in the spotlight. He seemed very detatched from the rest of the world, only interested in what was happening on his farm. It seemed he didn’t recognize Bella. She glanced towards the breakfast and she did have to admit her stomach felt like it was caving in on itself. Cautiously, she seated herself beside the tray and tried to not desperately drink the milk, but she took three hearty gulps. She worried for a moment that maybe it was laced, but she tried to tell herself she was being dramatic. It tasted so divinely crisp and creamy. The man continued with the pruning of his chocobo while Bella spread the butter across the bread, taking large bites and not caring where the crumbs fell.

“You come from Alexandria?” He asked, arching his bushy eyebrows. Bella slowly stopped chewing and glanced towards the man. She found herself rendered mute in the moment. The farmer was patient, however, continuing on with his task. ‘I only ask ‘cause you ain’t the first I’ve found sleepin’ in my barn. Y’all always pick the same spot, too. You come from the Orphanage?’ Hesitantly, Bella found herself nodding. “If you’re headed for Lindblum, make sure to take the left at the fork in the road up ahead.”

“I’m going to Burmecia,” Bella finally found her voice, washing her eggs down with milk.

“Burmecia?” The farmer echoed, lowering his brush. “Them rat people? Whaddya wanna do there?”

“I’m looking for the Northern Ports. I would like to sail.”

“It’s a shame you young people are turned out so quickly, expected to navigate this confusin’ world,” The farmer shook his head, giving his chocobo a hearty pat on its thick neck. “I see dozens of orphans like you every year, travelin’ these roads, sleepin’ in barns— just tryin’ to find something better. People say the world’s a better place. For them, maybe...”

Bella finished her breakfast and could almost sigh at the sight of her empty glass. She watched the last few foamy bubbles of milk dribble to the bottom of the glass. She climbed to her feet, however, aware she had to get a move on. By now, no doubt, the Alexandrian Castle had sent out fleets of foot soldiers and may have even taken to the skies. She had to continue to make headway, to stay out of the scope of their search. Bella was determined to do this for the Alexandrian Castle. She couldn't bear to see it destroyed again. It's as if she shared the same soul-crushing feeling her mother had felt all those years ago.

"Thank you... for the meal," Bella said, trying not to stumble over her words. "If anybody comes here... you won't tell them you saw me, will you?"

The man turned towards her, smiling all the while. "A farmer's promise, little lady. I hope you find what you're lookin' for."

"Yes, I suppose I do, too," Bella nodded. She walked a few paces towards the door, but the man called after her once again. She turned to him, arching her bold brows.

"It ain't much," The farmer said, extending a wedge of cheese out. Bella examined it in her hands.

It looked so irresistably delicious and full of crumbly wonderfulness. Gingerly, she tucked it into the top of her backpack, wounding a stocking around it to keep it safe.

“Thank you,” Bella said, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. “You’ve proved to me there’s still good in people beyond my world.”

The sun beat down but a cool breeze raced across the open plains. Sarah squinted as she marched along the path, her sword beating against her back. She had tied her blonde hair atop her head, some locks falling to frame her face. Her eyes darted across the horizon, looking for anyone. But not a soul was to be found. As they came over another rolling hill in the path, Sarah paused, scuffing her boots to the dirt. Dante turned in circles, looking all around them, and towards the peaks of the icy mountains.

“Daasenburg, how far out are we?” Sarah asked, glancing towards her crew.

“This will mark twenty-five kilometers, Your Highness.”

“Blitzen, please return to the castle with an update,” Sarah said. “I’m sure Beatrix has grown impatient.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Blitzen saluted before hurriedly turning, his boots crunching on the gravel.

Sarah listened to his footsteps fade away. She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her chin down, gazing out into the field on the glimmer of hope a dark haired person would be seen. Instead it was nothing but a tranquil scene of the slow-paced farm life that filled the acres between the kingdoms.

“What’s on your mind?” Dante asked, setting his hands on his hips. The open breeze brushed his dark hair from his face.

“Well, I’m realizing my sister is a very fast walker,” Sarah looked towards him. “And obviously quite sneaky. You know, not a single person said they saw a young girl with dark hair walking alone down this path. We’ve asked every farm along the way! I’m starting to think that maybe she didn’t come this way.”

“No sightings on the Western or Southern Highways, either, though,” Dante replied. The two fell into a silence again. Behind them, their crew of

knights walked about the area, sifting through the tall lush grass and admiring the wild flowers momentarily.

“What other way could she have gone? There’s no passage north of Alexandria,” Sarah shook her head, obviously frustrated. “Sure, it could be the most direct way if she were a mountain climber. But then... how does she cross the ocean?”

“You’re going too many steps at a time,” Dante told her, looking around the surrounding area. His tan skin gleamed in the bright sunlight. “It’s possible she walked over 30 kilometers in one day. We need to broaden our radius. And hope that we get some reinforcements in the air soon.”

“I guess we should continue along this path. With any hope, Bella isn’t too far ahead. Or maybe someone saw her. Surely she stopped somewhere to sleep,” Sarah turned towards her scattered troops. “Find anything interesting?”

“These petunias tickle my nose,” Faaber giggled from where he crouched on the side of the path.

“Nothing of interest,” Daasenburg replied, glancing towards Faaber with exasperation.

Sarah pursed her lip and glanced to the horizon they found themselves heading to. Dante saw the worry etched into the side of her face as they began further up the path, that revealed nothing and no one. Sarah soon began to pick up the pace as she walked, craning her neck to look into fields, on the single desperation of catching a glimpse of a dark haired girl. She closely observed fences for damage and signs for hidden messages. She looked towards tall fields of grass, searching for indentions of travel through the foliage. But everything was the same it was always expected to be. Not a single sign of Bella. Up ahead, however, they could see someone approaching on the path.

It was an old farmer with a slight hunch in his posture and deep tanned skin. He was riding a chocobo which hauled a cart full of products for the market. Sarah took off running at the sight of him, not even waiting for the rest of her crew. Dante wasn't far behind, however, as Sarah came to the chocobo's side. The farmer pulled the reigns, giving his dear chocobo a curt pat. Dante glanced to the arrangement of cheese wheels, grapes, cabbages, flowers, and spices that lined his cart.

"Excuse me, sir," Sarah said. "Have you by chance seen a young girl, about this tall, with dark

hair travelling by herself on this road?"

"Eh?" The farmer cocked his head at her. "Who's askin'?"

"Please, sir, my name is Sarah Alexandros-Tribal XVIII, and these are the Knights of Pluto," Sarah explained as the breeze carried her ponytail over her shoulder. "I'm looking for my little sister, Arabella."

"I ain't seen no one by that description. A runaway princess, would ya get a load of that," The farmer chuckled to himself from where he perched on his chocobo. Sarah sheepishly scraped her boot through the gravel. "It's gettin' far too cold to be travellin' these roads. She probably didn't come this way."

"Thank you, anyway," Sarah said. Stiffly, she carried on down the path and the sound of his cart wheels began to creak out of earshot. Sarah brought her feet down heavily against the path as she continued. But after a few moments she stopped and in an utter rage, drew her sword and hacked it directly through a fence, breaking the beams in half. The Knights of Pluto gasped at the sight. 'She's already gone, Dante, I just know it. She was faster than us. She could be beyond those mountains. Already right outside of Kuja's fingertips!' Sarah

breathed heavily as she sagged her shoulders and lamely held her sword at her side. “There’s not a single sign of her.”

“We just have to keep moving,” Dante came towards her, tenderly gripping her elbow. “Come on, other patrols are covering the other highways. We need to stick to this path and stay in communication. Someone’s bound to come across something. We need to go as far as we can.”

Sarah pursed her lips, looking towards the mountains. “How far can we go, Dante?”

“I guess as far as there’s land, right?” Dante shrugged.

Distantly, a droning noise sounded as if it was getting closer. Slowly, it grew in complexity of pitch as it approached over the rolling hills of the plains. A large airship sporting the Alexandrian crest on the side emerged into the cerulean blue skies. Sarah looked up, holding a lock of hair behind her ear. Sarah couldn’t help but smile at the sight of it. They waved to the crew on deck.

“Okay,” Sarah looked amongst the men. “We have to keep moving.”

Zidane held Alex's hand as they found themselves aboard the deck of an airship within the docks at the castle. The young princess' big eyes darted amongst the crew who readied themselves for flight. Despite being very curious, she felt the need to stay by her father's side. The bay of the dock had been open and Alex tilted her head into the sunlight, making sure her doll felt it, too. It was quite a beautiful day. The kind of day the family would take a walk through the garden that would hopefully end in a game of chase. A night of catching lightning bugs on her father's balcony. How she missed those times. When everyone seemed happier. Why did everyone have to grow up and apart? The thought unnerved the princess. She never wanted to grow up if it meant never poring through her Tetra Master cards or playing with pop-up books. How was she supposed to sleep without a few dolls tucked around her to protect her?

Alex spied Eiko standing at the front of the ship. Her arms were crossed over her chest as the sunlight fell over her, making her blue hair glisten down her back and her porcelain skin glow. It was easy to tell she was upset. Zidane was speaking with Freya. They were departing for Burmecia on the chance of meeting Bella there. They had a chance of spotting

her, too. The Eastern Highway lead towards the Northern Gate. They could alert the guards to be looking for her. Alex began to pull her hand away from her father and he paused from speaking, looking towards her.

“Don’t go far,” Zidane told her. “Stay on the deck until after we’ve taken flight.”

Alex held her doll against her chest. The small girl wondered through the crowds of helpers that had been hired for the expedition. They cursed and smoked as they used ratchets to strap crates in. Some men unloaded swords and pikes into makeshift shelves for the crew to pick amongst. Several nurses were sorting through medical supplies. They even had life vests. Alex’s curly hair bobbed against her shoulders as she finally emerged at the front of the ship. Eiko hadn’t noticed her quite yet. The older princess stewed about in her mind. Alex came to stand beside her and Eiko glanced down, pursing her lips to see her company. She was nearly an exact replica of Zidane besides her eyes. Those rosy cheeks and round nose. Her curved eyebrows. The tail. She was nothing short of Zidane Tribal’s daughter.

“I’m sorry about what my sister’s said to you,” Alex peered her dark eyes up at Eiko. The Princess of Lindblum did her best to keep her face stone hard, pushing down to repress the emotional outbursts she had been prone to most of her life. “They probably didn’t really mean it.”

“Those are their words to choose,” Eiko blinked rapidly, gazing out at the sprawling garden. “I only hope we can make things right again.”

“Oh, they’ll get over it,” Alex shrugged. “They never stay mad at me too long, anyway.”

A small smile spread across Eiko’s face. “You’re rather hard to stay mad at, Alexandra.”

“Y’know,” Alex turned to Eiko. “You’re the only one who calls me by my full name.”

“As a sign of respect. And to pay homage to who you were named after. Besides, you’re the perfect embodiment as the happiest princess to ever sit on the throne.”

Alex scuffed her flats back and forth. “I’m not happy right now. I just want to see my sister’s again.”

“You will,” Eiko nodded. “I promise.”

“... the wind is on our side today,” Freya said to Zidane from beside the control room in the center of the deck. “In conditions like these, we can make it Burmecia in just a few hours.”

“Good, we can alert the Northern Gates, and wait for her,” Zidane nodded. “This might actually work, Freya.”

“Zidane,” Steiner came aboard the airship now, followed by Beatrix. “We’ve received word from Sarah’s troop. Twenty-five kilometers out on Eastern Highways two hours ago. Continuing towards the Northern Gates. I sent back word we were departing for Burmecia.”

“I brought what you asked for,” Beatrix extended a small mahogany box out towards him. On top, was an intricate carving of the Alexandrian crest. Zidane pursed his lips as he took into his hands, giving her a curt nod.

“Alright, let’s take to the sky. Fire up the engines.” Zidane said, glancing to the front of the ship where Eiko and Alex were speaking.

Bella combed her hair from her face as another cool breeze washed over her. Her legs were dearly sore and tired, but she walked with brisk purpose along the path. She couldn't work the courage up to even look over her shoulder. Around her, more trees had begun to spring up with vibrant bushes sporting exotic berries. Bella knew better than to pick them. She didn't know which ones were edible. She was hoping to come along a spring or a small river. She was very thirsty. The farm land was becoming very sparse as she began to enter a different region of the Mist Continent. Up ahead, she noticed a fork and breathed a sigh of relief. She was getting close. Bella paused at the sign. Left directed her towards Dali and Lindblum. To the right, Burmecia.

She decided to take a break. She didn't know how long she'd been walking, but she figured by the position of the sun, it had been hours. Bella seated herself in the shade of some trees just off the path. The grass tickled and poked her through her stockings as she stretched her legs and back out, letting out a long sigh. She reached into her backpack and unwound the wedge of cheese from her stocking. As she broke off small bits to nibble on, she soaked in the sounds and surroundings of the nature around her. She had never seen the world this

raw before. It had always been fancy castle halls and mansions, warm and brightly lit. But now, Bella found herself in an overgrown, almost exotic, world. She curled her toes in her tired boots as she continued to eat her cheese.

From a distance across the plains, Bella heard a peculiar noise coming from the sky. Furrowing her brow, she cautiously leaned out from the tree cover, seeing plainly in the sky a fleet of airships. They were both a mix of Alexandrian and Lindblum. Bella nearly swallowed a crumb of cheese whole. She knew they were looking for her. They weren't going to allow her to do what she thought was right for her kingdom. For her family.

Hurriedly, Bella packed her cheese away into her backpack and staggered to her feet. She darted behind her amongst the trees and foliage, leaving behind the single stocking she had used to keep her food safe. She hopped over protruding tree roots and scraped through prickly bushes. She couldn't take the main way anymore. She would have to forge her own path. The shade of the tree canopy made it somewhat dark in the forest. Bella felt along the rugged tree trunks, brushing her hand through thick vines and branches. The sound of a barking dog rang out behind her and immediately, her feet carried her

forward at rapid pace as she blindly guessed the direction of the Northern Gates. Bella leapt between trees. She didn't know if her mind was playing tricks on her, but the airships overhead sounded as if they were coming closer and closer. Bella's heart was beating furiously in her chest.

She pressed herself to a tree trunk, watching at the canopy overhead began to rustle. The shadows darted across the mossy ground and Bella tried to flatten herself against the tree as the light crossed over her boots. Suddenly, however, slender arms came to wrap around her from behind, gently pressing a palm over Bella's lips. The princess' skin grew clammy and she struggled against the arms, looking over her shoulder. A red headed woman, carrying an exotic air about her, smiled down at Bella as the young girl squirmed.

"Sh, sh, don't fight me, my child," She whispered against Bella's ear. "I'm here to help you. I can take you to Kuja, Arabella."

The princess paused, her cocking her head towards the woman. Carefully, her captor removed her hand from Bella's lips. "I wish to speak to him. Urgently."

“I will show you the way,” She replied with her soft voice, nodding her head. “We must hurry, Arabella. King Zidane will be landing in Burmecia in just meer hours. We must make haste. I know a way around the Northern Gates.”

Bella’s shoulders rose and fell as she listened to the constant overhead droning and the rustling of the shifting foliage. She wasn’t sure what to do. And she only had a split second to decide. Could she trust this person’s intentions? Did she really know the way to Kuja? Bella looked over her shoulder with wide, stoney eyes.

“There’s no time for an interview,” The woman told her. “My name is Fauna. I work for Kuja. Your father and I are somewhat friends, I’d like to think. We always have pleasant chats when we do see each other.”

“If you’re friends with my father, then why are you helping me?” Bella furrowed her dark brow.

Fauna’s ruby red lips slowly curved into a rather devious smile. “I guess I am more of his brother’s friend.”

Bella was quiet a moment. “My father doesn’t have a brother.”

“You thought the same thing about his sister,” Fauna shrugged.

“Are you telling me... I’m related to Kuja?”

“Come, child,” Fauna reached out, grabbing the rather blindsided young girl. “I can’t explain it all here. We must get ahead to the Northern Ports. There is a ship we can use to get to the Outer Continent.”

Bella didn’t have much time to think. Or really the capacity. Blindly, her feet followed in the path of Fauna as the two darted further into the forest, descending into darkness.

Sarah occasionally glanced towards the airships that dotted the skies. She figured at this point, someone would have seen something. She anxiously awaited the sign of a flare, indicating Bella had been spotted. But the crews on the ground remained silent and the airship crews only continued to drone on across the vast open sky. Beside her, Dante walked with his shoulders straight and his eyes never stopping from darting about. Just ahead, coming towards the distant Northern Gates was the airship

Zidane and Alex were on, destined for Burmecia as Blitzen had reported back.

The fork in the road approached and Sarah let out a huff, leaning up against the large sign post indicating right for Burmecia. She wiggled her foot free from her boot, shaking pebbles and rubble out. The crew mates hurriedly stuffed bread and honey into their mouths. Dante walked along the edge of the path, craning his neck. Nobody. He turned to look at the forest, casting his eyes towards the camelias that bloomed vibrantly just off the edge of the path. He paused, however, and slowly came to his knees. Just on the edge of the shadows, there was a crumpled black woolen stocking laying in the grass. Carefully, he took it into his hands and turned towards Sarah.

“Is this Bella’s?” He asked, extending it outwards.

Sarah viciously mashed her foot into her boot, staggering forward to clutch the stocking in her hand. “Yes, it has to be,” Sarah nodded, running her fingers along it. “It’s the same tweed as mine.”

Immediately, her crew mates staggered to attention, ready to comb the area. Daasenburg returned to the edge of the path. “There are tracks in

the forest. She must have diverted from the main path.”

Sarah pursed her lips, dropping her backpack to the ground. Some things tumbled from her rucksack as she pulled out the flare gun she had been given. She struck the match against the sign post and aimed upwards. A screech echoed through the area, a show of red lights exploding in the sky. “You three,” Sarah pointed. ‘Go straight to the Northern Gates, stick to the path. The rest of us, we’ll go through the forest.’ She lowered the smoking flare gun. “Let’s go! Sunlight is withering away!”

Alex stood on the base of the railing so she could gawk over the edge at the jagged and tall mountains that roamed through the lands, dividing kingdoms and people. The fluffy clouds seemed so much closer. Even though winter was waxing on, the sun felt so much warmer from the open deck of the airship. Alex let the air run through her hair. Though, she knew it would be a rat’s nest to comb out later. She looked out towards the open lands, spotting the small figure of those who had taken the continent by foot.

“We should be landing in about an hour and a half,” Her father appeared beside her, drawing her attention away from the ground. “I hear some reports about a nice lunch that may or may not have dessert waiting for us.”

“I’m not very hungry,” Alex lowered her chin to the railing.

“Alex, you barely even touched your oatmeal today,” Zidane reached out, pressing a hand to her shoulder. “I know things kinda suck right now, but you gotta take care of yourself. For your sister’s.”

“What if we never see Bella again?” Alex turned to look at Zidane. “What if Sarah never comes back? I have to think about a whole lot of stuff that I don’t want to, Daddy. I don’t want to think about my family dying. But we are!”

Zidane glanced around the deck, coming to a kneel in front of Alex. “Things seem kind of scary right now, I get that. You know, I’m scared, too, Alex. And... even though there might be scenarios we don’t want to face, there is still a way to be realistic, but optimistic.”

Alex pursed her lips, her eyes growing wet. But in the next moment, their attention was drawn to the

rear of the ship. A shrill noise rang out, popping off into the air a vibrant display of red explosions. Zidane stood, his eyes as wide as saucers. From the deck behind him, voices began to echo out.

“Flair sighted!”

“Stop the engines!”

The airship shuddered to a grinding stop, just kilometers short of the Northern Gates.

23. The Hill You Die On

Chapter Twenty-Three

The crew hands staggered about at the rear of the airship as they used rubber mallets to drive thick steel pikes into the ground, securing a rope ladder. They threw it off the back of the ship and it clunked heavily against the machine. Steiner brushed past Zidane who kept a firm grip on Alex's shoulders, pressing her against him.

"I shall go down," Steiner told him.

"I'm coming, too," Beatrix appeared beside Zidane. "We'll take two more with us. Zidane, you should stay here."

"No, I want to go," Zidane shook his head. "I need to put my eyes on Sarah."

"Sarah! I want to see her, too!" Alex leapt forward, grabbing hold of Steiner's waist. "Please, let me go. I can run really fast! I'll keep up, I promise. Please, please, Steiner!"

The Captain often times found it hard to say no to those big brown eyes. In many ways, Alex

resembled Dagger the most in her youth. She had been rambunctious and daring and creative and spunky. He missed those days of Dagger's pure joy. And how desperately he wanted to nuture that light inside of Alex. He sighed and looked between Zidane and Beatrix. Her father seemed on the fence with the idea. Beatrix's stony look conveyed nothing more than the word 'no'.

"Sure, you're light enough to carry, anyway," Steiner nodded. Alex gleamed with joy and went to inspect the ladder with the deckhands.

"Both of you have lost your minds!" Beatrix waited until Alex was out of earshot. "We have two princesses in harm's way, so you think the logical thing to do is let the youngest and most unequipped do it, too?"

"Sarah fired a red flair," Steiner replied. "That means she found a sign. A green signal would meant she found Bella."

"I'm sure the sixteen year old remembered that," Beatrix laughed, shaking her head. "Let's go, we're wasting time."

Dante and Sarah slowly made their way through the forest, craning their necks and squinting through the shadows to find signs of footsteps. There were crushed shubbery that wound through the trees and they found themselves getting further and further until it abruptly stopped at the base of one tree. Sarah turned in circles, looking in all directions of the confusing and deceiving forest. Dante stayed low to the ground, trying to find anything to symbolize which direction she continued. But it was if she suddenly knew where to walk or where she was going.

“How is this possible?” Sarah asked, feeling despair wash over her again. Over one hundred kilometers from home and suddenly, the trail had gone cold. Sarah fell with her back against a trunk, hunching her shoulders. “How could she disappear like this? Without a single trace?”

Dante looked over his shoulder. “I only know this from hunting but... the crushed weeds we followed here, it showed she was running away from something. Her tracks are hard and frenzied all through the tree corridor. It seems like she got here and... something happened.”

“Like *what*?” Sarah looked at him with eyes that were nearly desperate.

“I mean, nothing serious,” Dante stood up, gesturing around them. “There’s no blood or sign of a struggle. There’s a basic footpath here. I’m guessing she found this and stuck to it.”

Sarah’s sword pressed sharply into her back as she put her weight against the tree, rubbing her hands tenderly across her eyes. Dante could only watch from across the clearing. What a burden it must have truly felt like. Dante couldn’t imagine the thought of something happening to one of his younger sister’s. For Sarah, it felt like the world was shattering from beneath her. When Sarah pulled her hands away, tears brimmed her eyes and she ground her teeth together, kicking at the dirt in frustration.

“What if I never see her again, Dante?! How could she think for a single moment that sacrificing *herself* would be the right thing to do for our kingdom?” Sarah crossed her arms over her chest, a blond lock beating against her rosy cheek. “How could she be so selfish?”

Dante put his hands on his hips, turning to glance around the rather claustrophobic clearing they found themselves in. The leaves waved back and forth in

the gusts of the plains. Bright light wavered over the upset princess, who stared into the forest, wishing a clue would present itself.

“I don’t think she’s being selfish,” Dante kicked his boot back and forth. “From the history of your family I learned in school, I’d say there’s a million and one ways Bella can justify this in her mind. What about you? You just barged out on your father and little sister. Maybe they can call you selfish, too.”

Sarah sighed, tilting her shoulders back and forth. “Bella and I might be very different, but after our mother died, we stuck to each other like glue. It’s almost... betraying that she felt she needed to do this alone, Dante,” She turned to him, folding her hands in front of her chest. “How many nights did she lie awake thinking about this? How could she forget that I’d be by her side forever, for whatever? She didn’t even say goodbye... or write a letter...”

“We’re going to find her,” Dante reached forward, pressing a hand to Sarah’s slender shoulder. They both tensed, however, when they heard rustling in the bushes. Quickly, Dante pulled his sword and Sarah hurriedly copied. Together, they stood side by side, listening to the cracks of tree branches and

bending of bushes. However, what popped out, they were not expecting.

Princess Alex emerged from the bushes, pulling leaves from her hair as if she was disgusted. She ran her hands over a few scratches that now reddened her arms. After she finished brushing up, she looked to Sarah and her eyes lit up. She bolted forward, wrapping her arms around Sarah's waist.

"Alex!" Sarah exclaimed, grabbing her shoulder. "What in god's name are you doing here!? Have you been *following* us?"

"By airship, yeah," Alex nodded, her curls bobbing against her shoulders. "You shot a flair, didn't you?"

"And they sent *you*?" For Sarah, the story was becoming unbelievable.

"No, no, we're here," In the next moment, her father emerged from the brush, letting out a sigh of relief. Dante sheathed his sword now. Sarah looked to her father and pursed her lips. After a moment, she put her sword back into its sheath, as well. "We can't squeeze through all the little knots in the tree like Alex can." Slowly, Steiner and Beatrix appeared from the brush.

“Well, I thought Blitzen couldn’t count when he returned with word,” Beatrix tilted her head to side. “I wasn’t aware we’ve inducted a new Knight of Pluto.”

“He’s been more than helpful.”

“Why did you shoot the flair?” Alex asked, tugging at belt of her pleated pants.

“We found this,” Sarah reached into her satchel, holding a black stocking out towards Zidane. Tenderly, he took it into his hands. “It was just off the path to the entrance of this forest. Dante is an excellent tracker from hunting and her trail leads here.”

“Where does it go from here?” Zidane asked.

“From the tracks behind us, it seems like Bella was running from something. Whatever it was, she was in a rush until she gets here, to this tree,” Dante reported. Both Steiner and Beatrix looked to each other with the same word in their eyes: recruitment. “That’s where the trail pretty much ends. But there’s a footpath right here, that goes deeper into the forest. She’s probably heading for the mountain range, aware she can’t use the Northern Gates. Whatever

happened in this clearing, she stopped running. Her footsteps became much more controlled.”

“You don’t think... someone intercepted her, do you?” Zidane clutched the stocking tightly.

Dante shrugged, pursing his lips. “I didn’t see a second set of tracks anywhere. But Bella’s effectively disappear after this point so... I can’t say for sure, Your Majesty. It seems likely that she’s continued north no matter what.”

“Should we follow the path?” Sarah glanced towards the dark forest.

“No, we should all get back to the airship and cross the mountain range,” Beatrix shook her head. “Bella knows she can’t use the main routes anymore. We need to get to Burmecia and onwards to the Northern Ports. It will be her only way off the continent.”

Slowly, the group began to trickle back to the narrow path, glancing rather ominously to the crushed weeds and shrubs that had been victim to Bella’s hurried runs. Zidane gazed longingly into the forest before he turned to leave. Dante was taking up the rear when Steiner came to his side.

“Say, you’ve heard of the Knights of Pluto, haven’t you?”

Aboard the airship, Sarah found herself in one of the cabins washing her face in the shallow basin. She let out a long sigh as the chilly water dribbled from the end of her nose and down her chin. She looked to herself in mirror and lowered her eyes just as quick. She cautiously dipped her hands into the water, washing away the grime that had been caught beneath her nails. Again, she washed the water over her face and it fell beneath her collar. Sarah rubbed her hand to the back of her neck.

There was a curt knock on her door and a moment later, her father was squeezing into the narrow cabin with a small box in his hands. He shut the door behind him and walked a few paces towards the small porthole beside the bed. The airship engines groaned in the background as he looked down on the icy mountains below. He stared a moment longer, as if trying to find something. Sarah reached for a towel and began dabbing her face. Zidane inspected her, a grin coming across his face.

“What’s so funny?” Sarah asked, lowering the towel.

“You’re just...” Zidane let out a laugh, shaking his head. “You’re exactly like your mother, that’s all. Wearing your travel gear, ready to protect yourself... You’re just like your mother.”

Sarah’s face softened and she looked down at her tired clothes. “I guess I’m also like mother in the sense that... I never predicted any of this would happen...”

“No one could have predicted this, Sarah.”

Sarah sighed, discarding the towel on the narrow bed situated against the wall. “There’s nothing I would be more pleased to do than drive my sword through Kuja’s eye socket.”

Zidane glanced around the room. “It won’t be that easy.”

“I don’t care what it takes,” Sarah replied. “I will do anything to stop him. And please don’t say what I know you’re thinking, Daddy. That you don’t want me to fight. I have to. I really do. And now I’ve gone and gotten Dante involved—I have to see it through. For Bella. And for you.”

“You have no idea what I’d do if something happened to you,” Zidane said very softly.

“Well,” Sarah turned back to the wash basin, watching the foggy water wobble with the movement of the airship. “The same goes for me, too, Daddy. You’re not that energy-filled egocentric boy Steiner always tells me about. You’re my tired old dad. You need my help.”

Zidane lowered his eyes to the box in his hand. His fingers carefully ran across the wood carvings, remembering a different time, a different place; utterly an entire lifetime ago. “The important part is finding Bella. If we can keep her from Kuja... we’ll be in control.”

Sarah watched her father carefully. “What’s that?” She asked, coming towards him.

Zidane took in a deep breath, holding the box against his chest. He couldn’t remember the last time he had even so much as peaked inside it. Maybe not for at least eight years. What had used to bring him comfort and solace had become an ancient relic of soured memories. Of remembering he could never have what he truly wanted. Zidane’s eyes hovered over his eldest daughter. She was shaping up to be as tall and slender as he was. She was taller

than Dagger at sixteen years old. Her blond hair was confined upwards, but messy and frizzy from days in the elements. Her clothes were of good quality, but quite dusty and in need of a good scrub. Her skin was faintly smudged with weather and her eyes conveyed a sense of exhaustion. In a matter of moments, she looked completely grown up to Zidane. Her long silver sword glinted faithfully on her back, a shiny garnet nearly smiling at him. The king could almost panic for a moment at the thought. Sarah was an adult. A real live young woman. And it was hard for him to accept. He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, lowering the box between them.

"I think it's time you have this," Zidane told her, pressing a shaking finger to the lock. "With everything that's happened, Sarah, it didn't have you hiding behind the curtain. You took charge. And refused to take things at face value. And that is why someday you will be queen... but you will always be yourself. It's time you wore this to make yourself be known. As the force you reckon with," Zidane slowly tilted the box open.

Sarah stared in a bewildered silence for a few beats, pursing her lips together. Cautiously, her slender fingers reached out to gently comb the

purple velvet liner and nudge the coolness of the necklace inside. Sarah's blue eyes nearly glowed in its reflection. "The Raven Claw Pendant..." Sarah whispered. 'Mother's necklace— you're sure?' Sarah knit her eyebrows together, looking to her father. "You trust me with it?"

Zidane grinned, tossing the box onto the bed. He held the necklace up by its silver chain, watching the multi-facted jewel glow in the afternoon light. He came around Sarah, hooking the chain at the nape of her neck. Sarah watched, almost with a heavy heart, as the Raven Claw fell against her chest. Her mother should have still been alive. She still should be wearing this necklace. Sarah cradled the jewel into the palm of her hand, her thumb running along the ridges.

"Why wasn't Mother buried with this necklace?" Sarah asked, looking at Zidane. He seemed to be looking at Sarah with eyes that strained not to leak salty tears. "She wore it every day."

Zidane slowly licked his lips. "It wasn't customary, so I was told," Zidane replied with a tight throat.

They turned their heads towards the small porthole in the room, watching as slowly, a steady

rain began to pick up, pelting against the glass. A deep thunder rolled by. Sarah pursed her lips, lowering the pendant against her chest.

“We should talk to Beatrix about our next strategy. We need to fan out the moment we dock in Burmecia,” Sarah said, opening the cabin door.

“Have you eaten today?” Zidane crossed his arms over his chest.

“Daddy, please,” Sarah nearly rolled her eyes.

“I’m being serious.”

“Do you ever stop being a dad?” Sarah deadpanned, slouching her shoulders.

“Beatrix can tell you all about war strategy over a bowl of oatmeal,” Zidane countered, ushering Sarah out of the narrow airship cabin.

The cave was dark as pitch. It was quite weavy with only intermittent rays of light coming from distant cracks. It smelled richly of pond scum and algae. The sounds of a hundred dripping faucets rang out across the dark and disorienting space. Fauna’s hand held Bella’s as she carefully led the

princess through a narrow jagged hallway that smelled of mothballs and standing water. Bella scrunched her nose up at the ghastly smells and folded her face in pure horror as she heard her boots splash through water she imagined as putrid and toxic.

“We’re almost there,” Fauna’s velvet voice came from the darkness. A rock fell down from its perch on a mound. Bella scraped her feet together, almost tripping for a moment. Fauna held her steady, though, and they continued to press themselves through what felt like crevices. “Not the most scenic way...” Fauna said as she guided Bella’s arm through a space to press past a large rock. “But it sure does get the job done when you’re a wanted fugitive who can’t cross official borders.”

“Are those the words they use to describe me?” Bella asked, a sensitivity leaking into her tone.

Fauna smiled to herself, giving Bella’s wrist a squeeze. “They don’t understand, Arabella. Most basic humans cannot. But don’t worry... I understand you. And more importantly... Kuja understands you.”

Bella felt her way along the damp rocky walls that surrounded her, focusing on getting out as

quickly as possible. It was so disorienting wandering through a shrouded cave. After a few more minutes of walking, Fauna's boots scraped to a stop.

"This is it. The exit. Come right here, Arabella," Fauna tugged Bella's wrist forward. "I need you to help me push this door outwards. We're on the other side of the mountain range."

Together, the two wiry woman dug their boots into the uneven and dusty ground. Bella ground her teeth together as she pushed with all her might, wanting to so dearly take a breath of fresh air and not feel blind. The grinding sounds of rocks could be heard and after a moment, the door finally began to give it. It surged forward and Bella was greeted by a blast of cool air and the sound of a steady rain to the planet. Bella stepped forward into the gloomy undercast of the storm. A deep rumble of thunder carried through the plains. The rain was chilly and caused goosebumps to pucker on Bella's skin as she stepped out beneath the downpour.

Across the wide hilly plain before her, she saw, distantly, the tall and jagged skyline of Burmecia. Bella's dark locks stuck to her forehead and cheek as she squinted her eyes into the stormy sky. There

were two airships flying directly for Burmecia. No doubt were they looking to intercept her.

“We must hurry,” Fauna tugged Bella’s arm, surging the girl forward on a footpath. “The ship that leaves for the Outer Continent will go with or without us. If we miss this boat, we’ll have two weeks of living under the radar to confer with.”

The girl’s boots squished through the somewhat dissatisfying texture of ground beneath them. A mix of dirt and sand. It was stuck like glue to the bottoms of their boots. Bella’s hair was flattened to her head now as she trailed alongside Fauna, doing her best to keep up with the tall girl who walked in long strides. Bella wet backpack thudded against her damp jacket as she glanced out towards the somewhat foggy and murky lands that surrounded them.

“What is Kuja like?” Bella asked, pushing her sopping bangs from her face.

Fauna smiled at the question, casting a glance over the young princess. “Eccentric. Daring. Cunning.”

“Is he... anything like my father?”

“No,” Fauna shook her head. “Or at least that’s what Zidane says.”

“Well, what made my dad and Kuja hate each other so much?” Bella furrowed her brow. “Something really bad must have happened when they were children.”

Fauna laughed, pausing now and crossing her arms over her chest. Bella continued a few more paces before stopping and digging the toe of her boot into the sandy slop beneath her. Fauna glanced at a lush thicket of wet grass growing directly off the path. Despite the steady downpour, ladybugs of a variety of colors trickled all over the precious green blades.

“You don’t quite understand, child. But it’s alright. Kuja is going to make things crystal clear for you, okay? There is one thing you must understand before you arrive at the Iifa Tree, however,” Fauna bent over, pressing her hands to her knees to get eye-level with Bella. Fauna could almost giggle at the very sight of the princess. It was like finding a homesick puppy roaming in a directionless manner. “Zidane and Kuja did not have the typical upbringing your little mind is only capable of imagining. There were no brotherly spats over the

last piece of ham at dinner or who had the fluffier pillow. No... the past is much more troubled and complex than that. That is what you must understand, Arabella. Everything in life has a complexity to its existence. It is not simple to sustain things and give them life. It is much easier to destroy things and not ask questions. Do you understand?"

Bella again had to rake her sopping wet hair from her face as she hugged herself. Quietly, she nodded at Fauna, who seemed pleased by the simple answer. After a moment, their boots again were squishing and flopping through the poor excuse of a footpath that followed the northern coast of the Mist Continent. The distant droning of airships occassionally cut through the neverending droplets of rain. It would make Bella's hair stand up on the back of her neck. Just across the plains, Bella knew there were people hurriedly defeating the weather to stop her. Her father would do it the hard way if it meant saving her. *But sometimes, Daddy, the hard way will never pay off. You have to choose the hill you die on wisely*, Bella thought, as she stared ahead through the montonous rain.

Bella was certain she had a plan far more clever than her father's. And maybe even Beatrix's.

24. This Isn't Giving Up

Chapter Twenty-Four

The occupants of the Royal Alexandrian Airship took shelter in the rather spacious mess hall from the rain. They would be docking within the hour at Burmecia. Zidane ushered Sarah into the room and hawked over her until he was pleased with the oatmeal bowl she had decorated in granola and fresh garden berries. She quickly found Beatrix, who was looking over maps of intricate and forgotten roadways of the Northern Passages of the Mist Continent. Zidane glanced around at the lounging soldiers. Steiner and Freya had gotten themselves hot apple cider and spoke quietly together at a table. Dante had fallen into the grasps of Alex's attention and she fanatically explained her cards to Dante. Luckily, the young boy had some leftover knowledge of the game from his school yard days, but he was much more of a marble shooter. But across the room, near the very back, sat Eiko by herself. She stirred a cup of tea rather mindlessly, looking towards the wall of windows that sported the open air unfurling before the airship. Raindrops splattered against the panes, reflecting the

ruminations everyone in the room felt uncomforted by. Zidane shifted his feet back and forth and found himself walking towards her.

Eiko noticed him rather quickly. To her, he stuck out like a sore thumb. A shining beacon in a vastly dark and empty sea. But Eiko averted her eyes just as quickly, deciding her already sweet tea needed more sugar cubes. Zidane pulled himself onto the bench across from her, folding his arms out in front of him. He watched her slender fingers nervously stir her silver spoon about the cup. Zidane could only watch her. And she was well aware he could see right through her. His daughters and many loyal subjects all admired Eiko, thinking she was so well composed, so intelligent— but deep inside he still saw a little girl who was frightened but eager.

“How are you?” Zidane asked and she paused at the question, looking at him with sharp blue eyes.

“I should be asking you that,” Eiko replied, delicately replacing her spoon on the saucer. A crack of thunder rang out overhead. “You’re the only who has had his lights knocked out, a virus inserted into your bloodstream, and had a daughter go missing.”

Zidane tapped his knuckles to the table, rattling her tea cup. “Yeah, so things are tough all around.

It's never a good sign, though, when the Princess of Lindblum is silent." Eiko pursed her lips and Zidane sighed, setting his head into his hand. "My daughter's insulted you, Eiko. And you might like to pretend you're some invincible force, but I know those words struck a chord. Bad things were said in the heat of the moment..."

"You don't have to explain," Eiko shook her head. "I was once a thirteen and sixteen year old girl myself, Zidane. In a way, the entire carpet of their world has just been yanked out from underneath them. It's not why I've been quiet."

"Then what's on your mind?"

The way a bolt of lightning outside the window illuminated the side of his face almost had Eiko sighing. His complexion was clearing up nicely from the bruises and scratches. His lips finally weren't chapped and scabbed. His stitches would be due to come out soon, too. Even the scar across his neck was fading into something that had been apart of his skin his whole life. The way his blue eyes fell over her, Eiko couldn't help but feel rather meek. Pensively, she licked her lips.

"I've just been thinking about the current events... and well, it's had me thinking about the

past,” Eiko looked to the window, following the streaks of rain. “Do you remember what I used to be like, Zidane?”

“What, when you were a kid?” Zidane arched his eyebrows. Eiko had a sorrow in her blue eyes, almost. “Course I do. You never could shut up or stop those antsy feet. You never stopped smiling, either.”

Eiko sighed, lowering her eyes to her tea. “I wish I could still be that same little girl. How dearly I wish I didn’t have to feel this burdened. I still dream that I’m with the moogles, living in that rubble like it was a fancy castle in and of itself. Life was almost simple back then. When Sarah and Bella said those words to me, Zidane, I realized... I’ve effectively erased the person I once was.”

Zidane placed his hand on her arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I still see you, Eiko. You can’t erase the part of yourself that I know. None of us are the same people we were seventeen years ago. But we didn’t *lose* that part of ourselves... we simply moved on.”

“I feel like I gave up,” Eiko looked at him with a face of hurt.

“Sometimes it might look like giving up, but it shares a fine line with letting go, Eiko.”

Tears brimmed her eyes and she rubbed at them furiously, her face flushing. Eiko’s cheeks became red and she shook her head, carefully looking around to be sure no one was aware of her crying. “I’m sorry,” She said, rather strained, as she retrieved a hanky from her waistband and tenderly dabbed her eyes and nose. “The last words Arabella spoke to me before she disappeared were that I had ruined everything. That I had... destroyed your family...”

“We’re gonna get her back,” Zidane said. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself, however. “We can’t let Kuja win with his little mind games, Eiko. We can’t let him fracture us and drive us apart. We didn’t let him take Dagger and we didn’t let him take you. We sure as hell won’t let Bella do this.”

Eiko smiled in the next moment, still mopping her tears away. “How can you always be the one to take the role as the leader? How can you always find the words to help us keep moving? After everything that’s happened, Zidane, you’re the one who should be suffering the most.”

“I’m not the only person who has suffered, though,” Zidane looked around the large mess hall. “And I’d wager to say, nobody got that happily ever after that was always promised in the books. Total crock of shit.”

“You... don’t think I’ve destroyed your family, do you, Zidane?” Eiko looked to him, almost desperate for the affirmation. He could see how Eiko had muddled down in her thoughts. There was a crack in her mask. Eiko’s childhood wasn’t all smooth sailing after Regent Cid and Lady Hilda had taken her in. Though she finally began receiving her proper nutrients and even the education she so desperately wanted, the Lindblum Castle operated much differently than Alexandria’s. Zidane hadn’t forced his daughters to attend many etiquette classes or speech lectures. Beatrix made sure they had done the bare minimum, at least. Zidane had been much more inclined to focus on his daughter’s studies in arts, history, literature, and sciences. But Regent Cid and Lady Hilda, upon finally having the child they thought they never would, had put adamant pressure on Eiko to look and speak a certain way. Over the years of Eiko’s constant tutoring and forced saunters about the castle, it began to stick like glue to who she was. By Eiko’s eighteenth birthday, she had

become a reserved young woman, always with poised lips and a straight back, with eyes that observed more than lips that spoke. Regent Cid had been quite successful in creating an apt young person to take the throne and the total embodiment of Lindblum as a world leader. But in that moment, Zidane couldn't help but think at what cost?

"No," Zidane shook his head, smiling sadly. "This family's always been a little fractured but... we're stronger than this."

Another crack of thunder had Eiko looking out the window. She sighed, shaking her head. "I don't know what I'd do if we didn't get Arabella back, Zidane." Her round blue eyes were glossy in the storm's light. "I know I shouldn't think like that but... it seems to be all my mind can taunt me with. If we fail to get her back... I'll blame myself for the rest of my life, Zidane. Of all your daughter's, I am the most bonded to Arabella. In a way, it's like... she's my own blood."

"The moment we land, we won't waste a second," Zidane told her. "We'll head directly to the Northern Ports. At this point, we've had to have caught up with Bella if she's still going by foot."

Eiko pressed her knuckle to her quivering lips for a moment before she stood. “If you’ll excuse me...” Eiko said, abruptly turning and leaving the room. Zidane stared after her until a flash of lightning drew his eyes away. He blinked rapidly and sighed, coming to his feet and approaching the large window. Burmecia was in full sight now with its jagged and intricately carved buildings. Churchs spiraled towards the sky and the gold leaf on the castle gleamed in the dreary downpour Burmecia was accustomed to.

Zidane brought his hand forward to skim against the cool glass, pursing his lips.

Where are you, Arabella?

Bella and Fauna stopped to take a break beneath a large oak tree that shielded them from the storm that continued on across the rolling plains. Bella sighed, sitting down against the trunk and pulling her boots off. Her socks were soaked and her ankles were starting to rub in her rigid and wet shoes. Fauna took the time to squeeze her red hair out, but otherwise, her bodysuit didn’t look so much as damp despite the hours they had spent trudging through

the downright miserable weather. Bella let out a curt cough, whisking rain drops away from her hairline and ridge of her brow.

“Perhaps only a few more hours of walking,” Fauna said, leaning out from beneath the cover of the trees momentarily. “You’ll feel much better once you reach the boat, Your Highness.”

Bella opened her backpack and grimaced upon seeing her cheese was damp. Her stomach was gurgling, though, so she ate it despite it tasting rather washed out. Fauna observed the young girl. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold rains and sharp winds. Her thick black hair was windblown around her heartshaped face. The older woman crossed her arms over her chest and inspected Bella as she broke another crumb of cheese off for herself. At thirteen years old, Bella was quite lanky and slender. Not nearly enough meat on her bones. She had always been that way, though, no matter how much buttered bread or milk Zidane had given her.

“You’re going to get ill,” Fauna told her, making Bella pause. “Don’t you have an umbrella? Or perhaps a more suitable coat?”

Bella pulled back her hardend coat to reveal her dusty, wet, and tired cotton dress. She shook her

head at Fauna, a wet strip of hair sticking to her temple. “No, I only have clothes like this.”

“Hmph, what I’d expect of a girl with no mother...” Fauna shrugged.

*I want Arabella to arrive with no broken spirits.
Watch your words.*

The red headed woman tensed and cleared her throat. “No matter. You should change your clothes so at least we can continue with you wearing something warm. You won’t do well with a cold in the middle of the ocean.”

Bella nibbled on her cheese for a moment as she stewed inside her mind. After a beat, she nodded and set to pulling out different kinds of dresses. She realized, however, she only had a half of a stocking. As she recounted her steps, she remembered it had been the stocking that had been designated the protector of her cheese. But now, it was lost on the other side of the mountain range. Fauna looked around them, glancing towards the road that had been vacant their entire way. Bella had expected to see more people on her journey. But she knew she hadn’t chosen an ideal season of travel. Bella rustled about in her backpack, hopeful she had brought more stockings, but she only had the damp pair on

her legs and the singular stocking dangling lamely from her hand.

Carefully, Bella maneuvered out of her heavy and wet overcoat, allowing it to simply slump to the ground. She grabbed her backpack and rounded the thick tree to change in privacy. As she fumbled with the buttons on her dress, she gazed out towards the coastline that was only a few miles off. The foamy white tides washing towards the land were turbulent from the rain and a ghastly fog seeped across the surface. Bella wasn't able to see far into the sea, but she watched it toss and turn like her own internal conflicts. The sea was so vast, stretching far beyond the eye's sight. What lay beyond it? Hurriedly, Bella staggered into a gray satin dress with long sleeves and chose to replace at least one of her stockings for the sake of being dry. She ruffled her damp black hair from her face, bundling her wet clothes up and jamming them into her backpack. Her fingers ran over the mediocre patchwork her father had done to mend the bag nearly twenty years ago. She stared at it for a moment and sighed. She missed her father. She wondered what he was doing—what he was thinking? Was he angry at her?

Bella returned from around the tree to find Fauna holding her sopping wet coat. Beneath it, the

woman's slender fingers flicked back and forth, producing sparks. "I think I've warmed this up for you," Fauna held the garment out to the rather shelled-out looking princess. "Are you ready to move on? We have just a few more hours to go. We cannot miss the boat."

She was surprised to find the coat was quite toasty as she shrugged back into it, hurling her backpack over her shoulder. Bella nodded quietly to Fauna as she buttoned her coat, looking out towards the rain that fell over the planet. Together, the unlikely duo stepped back onto the pasty wet path, continuing north. In the distance, Bella could see an Alexandrian airship descending into Burmecia, disappearing behind the spectacular castle that sported sharp edges and gilded ridges.

"You know," Fauna said as the raindrops glided down her red locks. "You're the luckiest princess."

Bella almost wanted to roll her eyes. She pursed her lips, directing her sight forward as they continued on the lonely and wet road. "How's that?"

Fauna grinned down at the young girl who barely reached her elbow. "Not being the first born has its perks. You'll never have to worry about inheriting that kingdom. Sarah will take on all the

responsibility. She's quite fertile, as well, I'm sure she and Dante would make plenty of heirs. You can do as you please, Arabella."

Bella blinked rapidly as a rain drop came across her face. "How much do you know about my family?"

Fauna seemed so proud of herself as they kept walking. "It's my job to act as a sponge for Kuja. I am the leader of his people, afterall. I know all your birthday's, your favorite foods, your leisure activities. Even how often you brush your teeth. Someone should take Alexandra to a dentist, by the way."

Bella had tried for many days now to not allow herself to think of her family. In some ways, she was convinced she would never see them again. Even with the working plan in her mind, Bella was certain they wouldn't want anything to do with a girl who took flight from the castle without even so much of a letter. Bella was sure Sarah was saying 'good riddance!' and Alex was already making plans to take her room, which the youngest argued had the best view. From their prospective, in the darkness of her thought process, Bella knew that she had

probably hurt them. But she knew this was for the best.

Bella raked her wet hair from her face. “What was your life like before you worked for Kuja?”

The smile on Fauna’s face quickly dissipated. For a moment, she seemed almost confused by the question. She watched the road unfurl before them as she pondered her words. Bella wasn’t sure what to make of her puzzling reaction. Fauna pursed her lips.

Seamstress. You were a seamstress.

“I used to sew clothes,” Fauna finally said. “I used to make garments for important people. Just like you.”

“In Alexandria?”

“Mhm,” Fauna answered, rather absently.

Bella walked through a murky puddle, splashing dirty rain water onto her black stockings and staining them. She grimaced at her boots before looking to Fauna again. “Did you ever meet my mother?”

“The most beautiful Queen the throne has ever seen,” Fauna nodded. “Of course. She was a kind

queen who graced the streets with her dazzling looks. She had every man's neck in Alexandria snapping when she walked by to greet local businesses. How your father managed to swindle a woman of that caliber is beyond me. You resemble her the most. I have no doubt you'll grow up to be the spitting image of beauty your mother once was."

"How do you know my father?" Bella asked.
"Does he know you work for Kuja?"

Fauna chuckled at the question as she mosied around a mound of pasty dirt. "I met him through passing... fate, maybe. He's aware of my line of work. It's strained our relationship for some time."

"Are you interested in my father... as a suitor?"
Bella felt her cheeks grow hot at the thought.

"Maybe at one point," Fauna shrugged. "Your father is rather handsome. But I'm no good with children. I'd never be able to fill the shoes as a step-mother. Especially with an act so hard to follow."

"I couldn't imagine my father ever re-marrying,"
Bella shook her head, flinging strands of wet hair against the frame of her face. "I think my mother was the one and only for him."

“Maybe so,” Fauna replied. “Only time will tell that, Arabella, like it does so many other things.”

And in silence, the two continued through the misty downpour, disappearing along the curve of the coast, into the dense fog.

The Burmecian Castle was nearly in havoc upon the arrival of the Royal Alexandrian Airship. Soldiers darted about everywhere with arms full of weapons to pass out. Scholars wrote furiously on parchment pressed against the wall, trying to record every moment of the pressing matter. Beatrix met with Burmecia’s War Counsel. Zidane and Steiner helped sharpen blades. Eiko spoke with field medics. Everyone was quite busy. Sarah hadn’t been to Burmecian Castle in nearly seven years, when she was a very young girl. Alex was still learning to walk the last time she had been there. The castle was dark and moody compared to the vibrant and open-air castle of Alexandria. Sarah found herself wandering the halls, passing glossy windows with only a view of rain. The torches cackled in the hallways. It was the only thing to be heard. Fleetingly, hurried soldiers and nurses raced by Sarah without even paying any mind to her. Sarah

finally found the northern facing windows of the castle and she stood by herself in the empty hallway with tall vaulted ceilings, decorated in dark purples and glowing golds. The coastline was just barely visible from the window. Sarah wiped the fog away from the glass as she spied the small dot of the Northern Ports. Their next destination. She was anxious to begin the walk.

Sarah cradled the Raven Claw in her palm, tilting the spectacular gem back and forth, admiring the ridges and facets. Fleeting memories of her mother swirled past her. She could still hear that soft delicate voice of her's and the way she would sing Sarah to sleep. Sarah could almost feel her mother's soft hands running over her cheeks and through her thick long hair. It didn't seem so long ago, in the moment, when Sarah was last held in her mother's arms. Just days before her untimely death due to her illness. Even when she was growing breathless and tired from the virus, she still found the energy to sing sweetly to her daughter's and comfort them despite her growing discomfort in her skin. It was so unfair that she was gone, Sarah thought. How was a girl supposed to grapple without her mother? Though her father had done a miraculous job with the girls, nuturing them and caring for them, while

balancing an entire kingdom on his shoulders, Sarah couldn't help but feel the empty hole in her where her mother had once been. Zidane could never replace her, no matter how hard he tried. And in many ways, Sarah was aware her father knew this. Sarah sighed, looking back out the window.

She was frustrated. How dearly she needed her mother's advice in that moment. Was Sarah doing the right thing? Was she acting appropriately in her role as princess and a sister? Sarah wondered most of all if her mother would be proud of who she was. Sarah stared through the rain, her mind wandering to Bella. Where was she in this miserable weather? Was she healthy? Was she safe? Was she being fed? Where on Gaia could her sister possibly be in that moment? The feeling of not knowing only frustrated the young princess more.

"There you are," A tall, dark figure appeared beside her. Sarah was startled, but she cocked her head up to the comforting sight of Dante. His brown hair was damp and wavy on top of his head. He looked very tired, as well. Sarah was sure her face reflected the same exhaustion and she became acutely aware in the moment that her hair was as wild as a rat's nest. "The crew's about done packing up. We are just missing you."

“I didn’t mean to wonder so far, I...” Sarah paused for a moment, pursing her lips. “I just wanted to put my eyes on the Northern Ports.”

Dante joined her in looking out the window. “I’ve never seen them before, either. Actually doesn’t look too far. It’s hard to imagine this is the edge of the Mist Continent. I’ve never been this far before.”

“Once I step foot out of this castle, it will be the furthest I’ve ever been before.”

Dante glanced towards Sarah’s hardened face as she gazed out the window. Her eyes nearly begged for something to appear before her. Answers, perhaps. Or maybe she was reviewing memories. Dante reached his hand out, tenderly placing it to the small of her back. “Are you alright?” But he quickly stumbled over his words. “Sorry, that was a stupid question...”

“I’m okay,” Sarah said, inching closer to Dante to feel his warmth. “I just want to find Bella.”

“I think luck is on our side with this final walk,” Dante told her. Confidentally, he pressed his hand flat to Sarah’s back, relishing in the feeling of being close to her. “I’ve got a good feeling, Sarah.”

Sarah smiled in the next moment, which lifted Dante's heart. Cautiously, she lifted her hand to gently caress his cheek. "If you're feeling hopeful, then so I am, Dante."

The two young people smiled softly at each other. Though, maybe, they had the faintest glimmer of hope in their hearts, they still knew they had a long journey ahead of them. Dante dipped down carefully and pressed his lips to Sarah's. For the young forge apprentice, he felt as if life was suddenly a fast-paced game. Growing up with very little, he had no idea he would become familiar to the princess of Alexandria, kissing her beneath the tall and moody vaulted ceilings of the Burmecian Castle. For Sarah, she never imagined she would ever find a comfort more luxurious than castle life. They continued with their deep kiss, meeting each other's lips over and over again. It was almost like something of a promise. A bond that delved deeper than the dark inks of Lord Avon's writings.

Zidane rounded the corner in the next moment on the search for the two missing party members. He was exhausted but he knew there was no time for a nap. Time was of the essence and they had none to spare. Alex had thrown a fit upon being told she would stay at the Burmecian Castle. Luckily, Freya

had whisked her away to show her the secret stash of chocolate frogs the chefs kept in a hidden pantry. Zidane paused abruptly, however, as he gazed down the end of the hall, towards the wall of windows that let in the brilliant light of the daytime storm. Just in front of the windows, he spied his daughter wrapped in Dante's arms, her lips locked with his. Zidane felt his heart beat heavily in his chest and hurriedly he back pedaled behind the corner of the wall, pressing himself to the cool brick. It was already difficult grappling with the thought of Bella missing and the idea of Kuja running rampant again. But Zidane felt it was entirely impossible for him to wrap his head around his first daughter's romance. He knew the day would come, but he felt completely unequipped. Sarah was growing up too fast for him. His first born. She was the first to walk, the first to talk, and she had hit the ground running. Cautiously, he peaked around the corner to find the young people still enraptured with each other.

“Maybe Cinna was right...” Zidane murmured.
“Maybe there *will* be wedding bells come spring...”

25. Shattered Faith

Chapter Twenty-Five

The sky was beginning to darken when the team departed the Burmecian Castle. The help of the castle had dressed Alex in a hunter green woolen cloak that weighed heavily on the small girl's shoulders. Her face was pinched, her eyes as wet as the ground around them. When Zidane knelt down to hug her, she latched onto him like she was never going to see him again. Zidane had to admit, feeling her tiny arms hold him so tightly broke his heart. He, too, squeezed her back, lifting her into the air and tilting her back and forth. Tenderly, he kissed Alex's forehead, cheeks, and nose, but the smallest princess couldn't help but cry in her father's arms, which then lead to frustrating hiccups. He lowered the small girl back to the wet cobblestone that lead towards the castle. She shook in his arms, refusing to allow him to let go. Alex kept her arms locked around Zidane's neck. Gently, he wrestled back to look at her sopping wet eyes. How it made his heart shatter into a million pieces.

“One day, you’re going to understand, little monkey,” Zidane said quietly. Behind him, the team composed of Sarah, Dante, Steiner, Beatrix, Eiko, Freya, and additional help courtesy of the Burmecian Castle waited patiently. Zidane’s slacks grew wet as he sat on his knees in front of the trembling Alex. “Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow... maybe not even next week— but you’re going to realize why you have to stay here, Alex.”

“But... what if you don’t come back?” Alex croaked, holding his hand tightly against her, as if that would prevent him from walking away. “If I never see you or Sarah or Bella or even Beatrix ever again, how could I ever understand, Daddy?”

Zidane pursed his lips, gingerly tucking a wet strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re going to see all of us again, Alex. We won’t come back unless we have everyone— including Bella.” Alex was not convinced, however, and wailed out again, throwing herself into Zidane. He was trying so hard to keep it together, to not let his hurt fuse with her’s. He had to be strong. But in that moment, he just wanted to hold his little girl for a few moments more. He held her small wiry body tightly against him, his fingers knotting through her wet curly hair. Around them,

the rain pummeled against the glossy cobblestone bricks, their earthy tones illuminated beneath the ruminating storm clouds. His awaiting team watched the King hold his youngest daughter rather grimly. Though nobody knew what truly awaited them on this journey, they knew it would not be easy. It never had been. Seeing the King tenderly hold his little girl, kissing her wet face over and over again, brought great sorrow to the heroes. How terrible a thought was it to almost have returned to square one, where they once stood nearly seventeen years ago.

As Zidane stroked his hands through Alex's hair, listening to the patter of the rain, feeling it coursing down his skin, he couldn't help but think he had failed. This wasn't the world Zidane wanted to leave for his girls. Not the kind he wanted to expose them to. But it was all unraveling again and he felt powerless to stop it. Finally, though, the slender fingers of a maid reached for Alex's shoulders, pulling her away from her father.

"Daddy!" Alex nearly screeched as the maid picked her up. Her short arms reached out from beneath her woolen cape, the cold rain sliding down her porcelain skin. The look in her eyes was soul shattering. The maid held Alex steady as the young girl reached for her father, as if she was never going

to see him again. Zidane could only stare at her, with his heart pounding his ears, everything moving as if it was slow motion. Alex's tears streaked down her face and Zidane felt his breathing shallow as the rain pelted against him. Firmly, Beatrix placed her hand to Zidane's shoulder, drawing him back. The king staggered a few steps, still looking towards his upset child. His youngest. His baby. "Daddy!"

Steiner came to the other side of Zidane, his warm hand gripping his arm. Gently, Beatrix and Steiner tugged at him. But Zidane's eyes were still glued to the wildly upset princess who did her damndest to break free so she could follow. The maid was strong, however, and had seen many restless children in her day. There were no signs of her arms letting go of Alex. Alex reached her small slender hand out towards Zidane, her face pinched and nearly betrayed. Zidane also extended his hand, but she was out of his reach. Zidane's heart pounded in his chest as Steiner and Beatrix successfully dragged him away from the heartbreaking scene. Finally, Zidane had to will himself to turn around. His boots scraped against the slick cobblestone as he turned his back on Alex's cries. He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes shut as he forced himself to walk away. He lowered his head, the raindrops

falling from the tip of his nose. He felt like he almost couldn't breath, his gifted woolen cape blowing against his broad shoulders. Zidane felt anything but okay as he and the team descended the platforms of the Burmecian Castle.

The mud in the road had become diastrous. The path sunk nearly to sea level as Fauna and Bella continued onward. They now muddled through the way of travel. Bella was nearly ankle deep in mud and praying the slop wouldn't flow over to the inside of her boots. The rain was relentless. Bella had visited Burmecia a few times in her childhood and had long heard the tales of the eternal rain. She wished it would let up, but she knew that would never happen. The vast ocean was not far off, either, and the misty fog descended around the duo. Fauna pushed her hair from her face as she stepped through the murk, staring through the fog.

"There, the Northern Ports," Fauna pointed ahead. Bella squinted through the weather. Evening time would be setting in soon. But vaguely through the rain, she could make out the distinct shape of boats bobbing in the restless sea, crates stacked a top the glossy boardwalk, and several figures. Bella

hadn't seen other people in days. It was almost calming, in a way, to realize there were still other living beings out there. Fauna grabbed Bella's wrist, tugging her through the mud at a quicker pace. "We must hurry. From here, our journey will be easier. As soon as we get out of this damned rain, at least."

You don't have much time. Remember your powers.

Fauna ground her teeth together as she pulled Bella from the path. The two treaded through the slick grass in their clumpy boots, approaching the dock quickly. As they came closer, Bella saw several people of varying backgrounds wandering aimlessly about, looking towards the mountains and gazing out to the sea. They were all dressed like Fauna in the tight bodysuits with chainmail embedded against their midriffs and shoulders. Fauna released Bella, immediately approaching someone else to speak to them. The young princess went to the edge of the dock where she began scraping her boots against the edge of the wood. She watched the soggy clumps of mud drip from the planks, back to the ground, where it belonged. She pursed her lips and climbed onto the dock, adjusting her wet backpack against her even wetter jacket. Bella looked between the boats. None were of a spectacular size. She wondered if

they even had cabins down below. She walked between the two docked boats, trying to guess which one would take them safely across the ocean, towards the unknown. A crack of thunder rang out overhead as Bella inspected crates that were nailed tightly shut. Many said FRAGILE in dark bold paints along the side. Bella cocked her head to look harder at the crate when a figure emerged from the deck of the boat. Bella gasped sharply, staggering backwards, nearly off the other end of the dock.

It was a black mage. He wore long purple and golden coats with a dark brown pants. His yellow eyes lay on Bella for only a moment before he hoisted the crate into his hand, moving it onto the deck. Bella's eyes were wide as saucers as she watched him diligently work, not at all bothered by the downpour. Bella had never seen a black mage in person. He vaguely resembled the charcoal drawings she had seen of Master Vivi, one of the eight heroes of the Old War. One of her parent's best friends. Another one popped its head up with its flappy wide-brimmed hat, reaching for a crate and dragging it beneath the deck. Bella cautiously approached them, but they paid her no mind. It was as if she wasn't there at all.

Fauna's boots clunked heavily to the wet pier. Behind her, the people in matching clothes seemingly scattered. "It's time. We've made it this far, now all that's left to do is get on the boat."

"Who are they?" Bella pointed towards the rather mindless workers.

"Don't mind them. They won't bother you," Fauna waved her hand dismissively. Bella only watched the black mages continue to do their back-breaking work. "Get on the boat, Arabella."

The sound of an unsheathing sword was heard in the next moment. Fauna felt cool steel come to press to the nape of her neck. She paused, a smile almost coming across her lips. She didn't dare move to even look at who it was.

"If you even think of putting her on that boat, I will have you tried and put to death," Came a voice as hard as the steel of their sword. Bella looked around Fauna, surprised to see a group of familiar faces, dressed in woolen capes she had never seen before. Her father held his dagger outwards, a look of stone embedded into his face, as he held the weapon steady towards Fauna. Beside him was her sister, who looked to Bella with relief, holding her sword confidently in front of her.

In one deft move, Fauna slid backwards on the deck, grabbing Bella by the collar of her coat roughly. The woman had never handled Bella so callously. She let out a small ‘eep’ as she staggered back with Fauna towards the end of the pier. Behind them, she felt the mist of the raging waves beating against the algae covered pier legs. “A king as fair as yourself would allow his emotions to drive him to public execution? You’re no better than Brahne herself.”

“The difference is I actually care about my daughter,” Zidane replied. His voice bubbled with frustration and anger. “Release her. You’re at the end of the line, Fauna.”

Fauna smiled, tugging at Bella’s collar and drawing the young girl upwards. “You look at me as if *I’m* the traitor. I’m loyal to one. The same cannot be said of you. You make promises you can’t keep. You betrayed Kuja after you told him you would work with him.”

“You *what!*?” Beatrix lowered her sword for a moment, looking to Zidane. He didn’t flinch.

“The deal is off,” Zidane said through clenched teeth. “Kuja didn’t uphold his end of the deal. He was supposed to leave Bella alone.”

“Beggars cannot be choosers, Zidane,” Fauna shook her head, tugging Bella by her coat collar again. The dark haired princess’ heart beat rapidly in her chest. Her eyes darted between Fauna, the mindless black mages, and the team of Alexandrian’s and Burmecian’s who had come to her aid. Bella realized in that moment things were going gravely wrong. And, for the first time, she was beginning to worry for her life and everyone’s around her. She couldn’t even begin to guess what could happen next.

“Enough with the talk,” Sarah stepped forward, holding her sword up. “Hand her over or your head won’t be attached to your body.”

“My, my, that’s not how a princess should speak,” Fauna clucked. “The princesses minds have been poisoned by violence and the incredibly loose tongue of the king. An utter shame. But Kuja shall make amends of that.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this, Fauna,” Zidane came to stand beside Sarah. Bella looked to them through the wet hair sticking to her face. They both seemed so serious... so hardened. Bella had never seen Sarah look so adamantly angry. Her shoulders rose and fell, as if she was seething, ready to hack

her sword into the nearest body. She never expected her older sister would come this far to find her. ‘Can’t you see you’re being tricked?! You’re letting Kuja use you as a puppet!’ Overhead, a crack of thunder rang out and a gusty wind pushed through the scene, sending the cold rain sideways. “You used to be a regular human being, Fauna! You used to have your own life, your own emotions. Kuja has destroyed who you were. You’re letting him win!”

“Hush with your appeals, they mean nothing to me,” Fauna shook her head. “I’m tired of your talk. You’re nothing amusing, as you’d like to think.” Fauna lifted her hand. Beatrix and Steiner’s heads immediately snapped towards the boat, watching as the two mindless black mages began lifting their hands up and down, beginning what looked to be a focus of energy.

Beatrix wasted no time. She brandished her Save the Queen and deftly leapt onto a beam of the pier. She jumped into the air, landing on a crate and slashed her sword at the black mage, who clattered to the ground. Steiner hauled himself onto the ship, causing it to buckle back and forth. The last remaining black mage had a glowing light to it. The angelic beam met Fauna’s hand. Steiner lifted his sword.

“Don’t, you fool!” Fauna shouted, grounding her teeth together. Steiner brought his sword down with great force just as the beam of light erupted from the black mage. Immediately, the blinding light became an intense electrified blue. The very ground shook beneath everyone’s feet. Fauna’s arm was engulfed in the light and she strained under the immense energy she was met with. Beside her, even Bella began to feel the pressure as the electricity reached through Fauna and coursed into her. Dante nearly fell into the water with the shaking.

In the next moment, the pier was engulfed in an orb of light. And when it all faded away, not a single person remained. Flashes of ambers, emerald greens, and misty whites flowed past Zidane’s eyes. He felt as if he was hurdling through the air. His stomach plummeted as he found himself being tossed through the abyss. Fleeting whispers passed by his ear, making goosebumps pucker across his skin. A feeling of doom was beginning to unfurl inside him. What was this place? Fleeting thoughts of Memoria passed through his mind as he felt himself turning and tumbling. All those soured memories were coming back to the surface. He had tried so hard for the past two decades to bury the unwanted memories, dedicating himself to only remembering

the high times of his journey with friend's. But now, the damned past, with all it's baggage, was unfolding before Zidane into the utter pitch that surrounded him. A scream pierced his ears and he cringed at the sound. It was a familiar scream that sent a tremor down his spine.

Zidane jerked his head up from where he lay face down on a dusty, uneven, and rocky surface. Beneath him, rubble and dirt scraped to the ground as his stiff body slowly came to. His head pounded furiously. Nearby, the bodies of Beatrix and Steiner laid in awkward positions. Zidane let out a dry cough, tilting his head down. He pressed his forehead to the sharp ground, his mind still reeling. The chill that gripped his body was slowly dissipating into a radiating heat. He heard movement nearby and lifted his head, breathing heavily. Sarah was face down, as well, but she was awakening. Zidane blinked rapidly, looking around the area. Eiko, Freya, and Dante were all out cold. The Burmecian soldiers and nurses who were with them were no where to be found. The warm pain in his body quickly flooded away as he came to recognize what surrounded them.

Sarah let out a ragged cough and brought her head up. Her gloved hands rigidly ran through the dust and rubble that surrounded her. She had hit her head and a gash cut straight through her left eyebrow. Her skin was crusty with dark blood. Her sight was quite bleary as she grappled to become fully conscious. Overhead, a hot sun beat down on her; quite unexpected from the weather she was experiencing moments before the chilling darkness had overtaken her. Sarah coughed again as she tried to bring herself to her knees. But she slumped into the wall beside her. She squinted into the sunlight above as she attempted to catch her breath. Slowly, she looked at her surroundings.

It was nothing but rubble, it seemed. A forgotten place that had been overrun dozens and dozens of years ago. She found herself sitting in what almost resembled a colosseum. A wide circular space enclosed by tall walls that were crumbling and shifting apart. Towards the center, old pillars stood crooked and ready to tumble over. The ground was entirely uneven with protruding slabs of stone coming through the surface. The walls were covered in engravings and spectacular etchings of powerful looking creatures. Overhead, a large bird spread its wings and squawked. Sarah turned her head, looking

to the wall behind her. With a little effort, she dragged herself through the dirt, so she could better inspect what was written before her.

“Fear not the power of summon magic, but the ones who can use it...” Her scratchy voice read out faintly. Her bloodshot eyes darted to the left. *“Greed and instability endlessly repeat old mistakes... Will omniscience set us free...?”* She felt her breathing shallow, as if the words were leaping out at her. Sarah’s neck felt heavier and she clutched the Raven Claw in her palm tightly.

She heard stirring behind her and quickly looked over her shoulder to see her father was gaining consciousness. Sarah staggered to her feet and crossed to him, pressing a hand to his back. “Daddy, are you alright?” Sarah asked, rather breathlessly.

“I’m fine, I’m fine...” Zidane rattled as he came to his knees. Immediately, he reached his hands up to grip her jaw. “You’re bleeding. Beatrix has a first aid kit in her backpack.”

“I’m okay,” Sarah assured him, gripping his arms tightly. “Daddy, where are we?”

Zidane was quiet for a few moments as he caught his breath and inspected the unstirring party

members they had left. A gust of wind blew a swirl of dust into the air and the birds continued to announce their presence. He pursed his lips and blinked his wet eyes, looking to Sarah.

“This is where your mother and Eiko were born...” He said, softly. “This is their hometown.”

“Madain Sari,” Sarah had tears in her eyes now. She took in a deep uneven breath, gazing down towards the pendant dangling from her neck. She gripped it tenderly and slowly came to her feet. Sarah was slightly off balance at first, but she gripped a nearby decaying pillar for support. Zidane stood behind her, now, as she approached another section of writings. *‘I survived the storm... I wonder if you two are okay?’* She came closer to the wall. Zidane felt like all the blood in his body was rushing out of him. Sarah lifted her hand, gently touching the rigid etchings. *“I see the two of you smile every time I close my eyes. I imagine I see you when I open my eyes...”* Sarah pursed her lips, looking to her father. “Doctor Tot has always spoken of Madain Sari as being a sacred place... but... there’s nothing but misery etched into these walls...”

“This used to be a very special place,” Zidane replied, nearly numb.

“But it still has to be,” Sarah turned to him. “It’s an utter ruins yet... this is the pulse of the planet. Why has it been left like this?”

“It is left as testament,” A ragged voice said from behind them. Sarah and Zidane gazed into the rubble of the Eiodolon Wall, watching as Eiko rose. She had suffered a busted lip and scraped chin from the impact. She untangled herself from where she had fallen with Dante and cautiously came to her knees, catching her breath and coming to. Eiko pushed her hair from her dirt smudged face that was sticky with sweat. “This is what remains of the Summoners heritage. It is a fact.”

“Isn’t there hope to restore Madain Sari?” Sarah threw her arms out at her side, gesturing to the destruction. Now, all the party members were coming to. Freya reached for her hat that had fallen a few feet away, mashing it over her tangled and knotted ashen hair. Dante rubbed his dusty eyes furiously and rotated his sore wrist. Steiner gently caressed Beatrix as she sat up, rubbing dust away from her rosy cheekbones. “You and Bella... you’re still living testaments to the Summoner heritage. There has to be more we can do.”

Eiko weakly came to her feet. Dante steadied her for a moment, looking to Sarah whose bloody face was hardend. “You have read the textbooks,” Eiko said, with a voice that was faintly woozy. “Every war that’s ever been, summons have been used inappropriately. The people who do not understand *fear* us. And they are in the mass majority. I realize I’m fool now, trying so desperately to hold onto what I thought I had. There is *nothing* to be proud of as a Summoner. It only causes dread. Zidane, you were right. Eiodolons are weapons of mass destruction. I’ll never be entirely control...”

“Eiko...” Zidane stepped towards her, but in the next moment, she fainted backwards into Dante’s arms.

The creatures chirped loudly that night. The sound of the roaring waterfall brought some comfort to Zidane’s shot nerves. He found himself sitting on the back patio of Eiko’s old house. The kitchen was still in disarray, as if she had never left. Zidane had expected to find Lani here, but there was no trace. He recalled Mikoto had encountered her but a month ago. He reached into his backpack as flecks of mist speckled against his face. Zidane grimaced as he

withdrew a soggy pack of cigarettes. They would have to do, however. He lit his match and anxiously puffed on his cigarette, watching the end cherry. He then flicked the match away into the violent white rapids of the waterfall.

Zidane tilted his head back as he took the much needed drag. There were so many stars clustered above him. Bands of milky purples and greens reached through the galaxy. He blinked slowly as he exhaled, his smoke lazily slinking away from him. As he placed his cigarette between his lips, he wondered if Dagger had once been under this sky, looking at the same stars. Did she ever remember how beautiful the night was in Madain Sari, with it's orchestra of critters, and soothing sounds of water? He wondered if she had ever dreamt about the happy times in Madain Sari. If she had, she had never told him. The very thought of Dagger placed an excruciating pain in his temple, as if Kuja was reminding him of his presence. He furrowed his brow together, keeping his eyes trained on the stars.

He heard bare feet to the deck behind him and a moment later, Eiko was pulling herself into the rickety wooden chair beside Zidane. She folded her knees up against her chest and hugged them, placing

her chin on top. Zidane glanced to her, taking his time with another drag.

“You should be asleep,” Zidane said.

“You, too,” Eiko turned her blue eyes on him. But she heaved a high, hunching her shoulders. “I can’t sleep... I just—I hate being here. In my first few months at the Lindblum Castle, I thought I was homesick. But I realize now I really never wanted to come back.”

“How come?” Zidane asked, watching the waterfall.

“Shame... humiliation,” Eiko shook her head. “I broke my grandfather’s promise and I have continually let my people down. I don’t deserve to be back here again.”

Zidane flicked his cigarette over the railing, crossing his arms over his chest and sliding back in his seat. “You’re too hard on yourself,” He almost scoffed. Eiko looked to him, furrowing her brow. “You can’t take the burden of an entire civilization on your shoulders... it’s not fair. Not when you were born into the downfall. You got swept up in an avalanche with no hook, Eiko.”

“Maybe so,” Eiko lowered her dark, tired eyes. “But I’ve always liked to think I could help myself. I can’t, though, Zidane. I fail every time I try. I was never as strong as I wanted to believe. And... I’m just so sorry.”

“Why’re you sorry?” Zidane turned his head.

“I should have listened to you all those weeks ago, Zidane...” Eiko squeezed her eyes shut as she felt a wave of hot salty tears spring up. “You told me not to and I... I didn’t take heed of you or even take into consideration your side of things. I was so determined after that night at Sarah’s gala. I thought I was doing what was right. But now, everything’s gone wrong. And Bella is probably halfway to the Ifa Tree... just outside of Kuja’s grip...”

Zidane cast his eyes down as he listened to Eiko try to conceal the sobs attempting to erupt from her chest. Fleetingly, memories of Bella flashed by his eyes. He could see her young pudgey face, grinning with missing teeth. He saw her focused face as she divulged in her favorite books. He could see her sprinting through the castle garden. There she was reaching out to him, calling his name. He counted how many times he had seen her blow out the birthday candles. How many times she had asked

him to read to her, to sing to her, and to dance with her. Her entire face, with her dark locks framing her rosy cheeks, was beaming in front of him. She looked so much like her mother, it was almost painful.

Zidane sat forward in his chair and reached for Eiko's trembling shoulder. She lifted her sopping wet eyes to him that glistened in the moonlight. "I'm not going to let her surrender herself to Kuja, whether she believes it's the right decision or not. We're not going to let him win, Eiko. I swear it on my own grave—we will get her back. We have to believe that."

"I want to, Zidane..."

"Then try harder, Eiko... for me," He said, firmly. The two could only gaze tensely at each other.

From behind the duo, in the darkened archway, Sarah watched them carefully. Their soft words barely made it to her ears. Sarah couldn't sleep, either. She was totally unnerved. She felt off in this place. Something beckoned her, nearly spoke to her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Something so hauntingly familiar yet utterly obscure crawled beneath her skin. Quietly, Sarah turned on the balls

of her feet and maneuvered through the cluster of bodies on the floor. Deftly, she exited. But one young man had heard her and lifted his head, gazing after where the princess had disappeared. Dante only waited a moment before unfolding himself from his sheets and following her.

Sarah walked quietly and calmly in the rather tranquil night. She wound through the cleared aisles, glancing at all the utter destruction that surrounded her. She entered the spacious courtyard they had passed exiting the Eiodolon Wall. A small desecrated fountain sat in the center, bubbling with water. Sarah only listened. But in the next moment, a tingling sensation overtook her. And before her, the courtyard brightened. The stone beneath was flat and uniform. It had even been brushed. The fountain was restored to the once magnificent sight it used to be. Tall and proud, chugging water with force. Intricate carvings of ancient writings adorned its edges and at the bottom, silver and gold coins glinted from beneath the rippling surface of the refreshing water. People sat in benches or stood and chatted. The men smoked pipes and the young girls wore bonnets and gave chase to boys with curly hair. Giggles and shrieks rang out. Little feet to the cobblestone pounded about. Sarah's breathing shallowed as they

wound around her, not paying her the slightest attention.

A woman entered from the far side, coming from the Eidolon Wall. That's when Sarah noticed everything behind her. Little adobe houses, nearly stacked on top of each other reached beyond the Madain Sari Sarah had actually known. They surrounded the Eidolon Wall, belting out towards the coast. Women could be seen sweeping their porches and bending over wash tubs to scrub their clothes. Chimneys puffed light clouds of smoke. Madain Sari was alive. The woman who entered held her orange skirt tightly in her hand. She had long dark hair reaching down her shoulders. Sarah almost thought it was her mother. She had the same face. The rosy complexion, the bold brown, the curved nose. She gazed around the courtyard, giving curt nods to people as she passed. The children looped around her and that's when she did a double take in Sarah's direction. She waved her hand, her long bell-sleeve tumbling down her slender arm. The woman took a few steps forward, her skirt grazing the stone.

"Sarah! Sarah, come here!" She called. The princess felt herself blanche. A moment later, a small girl appeared beside Sarah. She was even younger than Alex. She was a clone of the older

woman, with long dark hair and big brown eyes. “You were supposed to be home an hour ago. We must have the rugs beaten before supper.” She reached for the young girl’s hand and began to lead her from the courtyard. Sarah took a few numb steps forward, watching with wide eyes as the child version of her mother walked away, completely unaware of her. Sarah could hear her heart throbbing in her ears.

Suddenly, though, a hand gripped her shoulder and she gasped sharply. The courtyard was dark again. The fountain was sloped. And all around them, it was just piles and piles of rubble. Sarah breathed heavily as she turned to see Dante, his face full of concern. Sarah pursed her lips, her shoulders falling up and down.

“What’s going on with you?” He whispered, bringing his hand up to stroke her jaw. She was tense beneath his touch. “You’ve been acting weird since we got here.”

Sarah’s blue eyes intensely looked to him. “I’m seeing things, Dante... I’m seeing my mother.”

Dante pursed his lips. “It’s just this place playing tricks on you. The rocks and shadows are deceiving,” He glanced around for a moment.

“You’re exhausted, too. When’s the last time you even slept?” Sarah blinked her red eyes, casting them down. In the past three days, she had maybe only slept seven or eight hours total.

“You’re right...” Sarah whispered, nodding her head. “I’m just tired...” She looked to the empty desolate courtyard, her heart sinking. It all seemed so real. She really thought she was standing in the middle of the once prosperous town. She thought she was seeing the true pulse of the planet.

“Come on,” Dante wrapped his arm around her, guiding her back towards the last remaining house of Madain Sari. “It’s chilly outside.”

From the shadows across the courtyard, however, they had never seen the dark figure that lingered against the ruins of a pillar. Fauna’s face was covered in blood and the healing of her once-broken wrist had been utterly undone. She breathed raggedly, filled with hate, anger, and pain. The stirring behind her had Fauna turning around. There lay Bella on the ground. Her wrists were bound in front of her with twine, her ankles, too. A dirty cloth covered her mouth. The young princess twisted and turned on the ground. Fauna carefully came to sit beside her.

“Wiggle all you want, Your Highness, you’ll never break free,” Fauna told her, spitting blood onto the ground. “I have but one more task to complete and you and I shall depart before sunrise. We will be with Kuja soon.”

Bella looked to her with wide and upset eyes. Nothing was going according to plan. She was now riding blind. Bella again rubbed her wrists back and forth, making noises through her facemask, but Fauna paid her no mind now. The older woman reclined backwards against a slope of uneven rubble. With her good hand, she cusped a green light in her palm and slowly worked it around her body. She let out sighs of pain as the green light flickered out. Fauna pursed her lips and tilted her head back as her body radiated with agony. She had to conserve her energy. Bella continued to shift around on the floor and Fauna let out another sigh, turning her head to look at the awkward convulsing princess.

“Give it a rest, little one,” Fauna said. ‘You’ll cover your body in blisters and ravage the last of your clothes.’ Bella’s nostrils flared as she paused and looked to Fauna. “Rest now. I’m not sure I’ll be able to carry you the rest of the way.”

Bella's heart was beating a mile a minute in her chest as she gazed up to the stars above. The twin dug into the skin of her wrists and pressed her boots rigidly to her ankles. Everything was going horribly wrong. Everyone was getting hurt. And it seemed the end of the suffering was far from over. How absolutely frustrating it was to be bound and gag only fifty feet away from your loved ones, yet they had no clue. Bella regretted everything in that moment. She wasn't the strong one. She was selfish. Tears surfaced in her eyes and leaked from the corners as she lay flat to the uncomfortable cold surface. She had made a mess of the entire situation. Bella was so utterly sorry.

26. A Fault in the Plan

Chapter Twenty-Six

Night waned on in Madain Sari. The orchestra of creatures showed no signs of letting up. On the floor of the forgotten house, several bodies lay buried beneath thin blankets, backpacks acting as pillows. The adventurers stirred in their sleep, somewhat on the brink of restless nightmares. They dreamed of their own beds back at home, the familiarity of what they once used to know. In Madain Sari, it was cold and quiet, lacking the warmth of life itself. The princess herself was in turmoil. She lay with a furrowed brow, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Her head was cocked to the side.

Her dreams greeted her again with the images of a prosperous city built among the rocks. A city of community, traditions, and pride flashed before her. She could see the people wearing their ceremonial garb, holding candles and incense, and marching in unison towards the Eiodolon Wall. She saw scenes of total normality, where the children played and frlolicked amongst the many courtyards of Madain Sari. Women wore their hair pinned to the nape of

their neck and shopped with wicker baskets dangling from their arms. The men went to work studying, praying, and doing the burdensome chores of fishing and construction. It was a city of harmony. But she saw it in the distance. Dark clouds as vast as the galaxy spread out in the distance. And wearily the people of Madain Sari began to notice more and more, yet what could they do? They continued to pray in their traditional garb, in gusty breezes, in chilling downpours, and in days of stifling heat. But there was no stopping the testaments of Gaia.

Sarah felt so dizzy as she found her footing amongst the courtyard again. It all seemed so real but so discombobulated. She staggered forward, towards stairs that would take her upwards. She ran her hands along the flat smooth rock walls that had once stood. They seemed so sturdy, it was hard to imagine they could be blasted to pieces. Sarah raced up the stairs, glancing down to the bustling life in the alleyways. No one looked to Sarah. It's as if she simply wasn't there. She watched an elderly woman with dark hair shine boots beneath the shade of her porch. Another woman swept the walk path, ordering her son to pick the weeds and hack down the little shrubs. Sarah stopped at his intersection that would take her into another tier of the mountain,

where more houses lay. Soon, she would be above the Eiodolon Wall. A young girl caught her attention climbing the stairs behind her. She was wearing a dark brown cloak and her long black hair fell down her back. She was very young. The girl tilted her head and Sarah knew instantly it was her mother. She looked exactly the same as the young girl painted on canvases around the castle. Sarah was stiff, nearly holding her breath.

“You could follow her,” Came a voice behind Sarah. She gasped sharply and staggered away. On command, she reached for her sword, but she realized it wasn’t there. Standing before her was a man with silver hair that fell over his shoulders. He was ghastly pale with purple rings surrounding his eyes. A purple cloaked draped him, but Sarah could see through the slit, a very poor looking body. Put back together almost in desperation. It didn’t look human. The man closed the cloak, tilting his head to look at her. “You could... see what she’s going to do.”

“Who are you?” Sarah asked, her voice plagued in doom.

“You know who I am,” He spoke with a voice of velvet. Sarah was almost shaking from where she

stood. “Say it. Say who I am.”

“Kuja...” Sarah said very faintly.

Kuja smiled. “I have finally figured you out, my little canary. Through your father, I’ve finally learned enough about you to understand you... to realize I’m not using you to your fullest potential. You are a capable swordsman... possibly better than your father. You are powerful, Sarah. Much more than you realize; than you’re allowed to exert.”

“You’re doing what you did to my father,” Sarah staggered back, bumping into a wooden fence behind her. “You’re trying to recruit me against my own people.”

“They hold you back,” Kuja nearly shrugged.

“Stop it,” Sarah shook her head. “I would never join you, Kuja. Not after everything you’ve done to my family.”

“Then I feel really bad that I have to do this,” Kuja’s face, however, looked anything but sorry.

In the dark house, Fauna’s red hair glowed as she came in through the slightly ajar door. Everything was so quiet. She gazed over the still bodies pensively, aware anybody could have very fine

tuned ears. She spied Beatrix by the back door, facing away. But just by the nearest wall lay Princess Sarah. Steathily, Fauna crept around Dante. She held her breath as she maneuvered towards Sarah, her leg flaring in pain. She reached down to place her palm to the side of Sarah's neck.

"Hey!" Dante shouted and suddenly everyone scrambled up from where they lay. He leapt forward, wrapping his arm around Fauna's neck. He was too late, however, as Fauna managed to send a shock into Sarah.

"No! *Goddammit!*" Zidane reached for Sarah, holding her head upwards. He felt little jolts and pricks of shocks as he inspected Sarah's neck where a vertical running sore now bore out. Zidane looked to where Fauna was held in a head lock in Dante's arms. She was in rough shape and in no condition to wiggle out. In frustration, Zidane punched her.

"Zidane!" Beatrix reached for him. Fauna laughed, spitting blood onto Zidane's boot.

"What did you do to her?!" Zidane demanded as Eiko inspected the princess.

Beatrix drew her sword, holding the very point beneath Fauna's scraped and scabbed up chin. "And

don't you dare think about saying *tricks and tales* again." Fauna was quiet, trying to catch her breath. Zidane shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You don't need a mirror to know how bad you look right now, Fauna," Zidane said. "Is this how far you're willing to go for Kuja? You're willing to die for him?"

"I don't want your pity," Fauna replied through clenched teeth, tilting her chin against the end of Beatrix's blade. "If you're going to kill me, just do it."

"It's not that easy," Beatrix said, pricking the sword against one of her scabs. Fauna winced. "We want information. And we'll know if what you're saying is a lie. So it's better to come clean now: where is Princess Arabella?"

Fauna smiled. "She is contained. And alive. I suppose that's all you need to know."

Beatrix looked to Steiner. "Comb the area. Freya, go with him. Be careful. There may be other goons like her about." Zidane and Beatrix worked on tying Fauna up, securing her to table leg. Sarah was beginning to stir, her head resting in Eiko's lap.

Zidane was immediately at her side. Dante and Beatrix worked together to wipe some blood from Fauna's face and fetch her some cool water.

Sarah's eyes slowly came open and she blinked rapidly. Her sight was bleary, but she was able to make out the face of her father. Zidane looked utterly relieved to see her awake. He reached down, gently caressing her cheek. Immediately, tears sprung to Sarah's eyes and she gripped her father's wrist.

"I saw her..." Sarah whispered. "I saw Mother... and she was no more than a five year old girl... living here in a beautiful, prosperous city..." Zidane ground his teeth together anxiously. Eiko watched her intensely. "And I saw Kuja... he was there, Daddy, in Madain Sari with me. He wanted me to join him..."

Zidane felt so endlessly angry. He viciously looked across the room with flames in his eyes. Beatrix felt the heat of it as she dabbed the blood away from Fauna's forehead. Dante set a bowl of water on the table, gazing towards the rather lucid Sarah.

"What did you do to her?!" He barked, coming to his feet. Eiko worked on cleaning the tender sore on

Sarah's neck. "Did you just put the same virus inside of her?!"

Fauna let out a ragged cough, tilting her head away from Beatrix's aid. Her shoulders slumped, overcome by great exhaustion. "No..." Fauna lifted her head to look at the seething Zidane. "It's inherently different."

"What does it do?" Zidane asked sharply.

"Only time will tell," Fauna fell against the table leg, gazing towards the rustling Sarah. "Time will tell..."

Steiner scrambled up onto a precarious stack of rubble, gazing out into the ruins. He looked back and forth, wishing the moonlight had less cloud coverage. He let out a sigh as again, no sight of a body came to him. He felt panic washing over at him at the thought of Bella being no where to be found. If Fauna was here, surely Bella was, too. Steiner looked across to a tall stack of what used to be pillars. Freya was perched atop with milky moonlight spilling over her blue coat.

"Anything?" Steiner called.

Freya shook her head grimly. “Nothing from here. Let’s search towards the Eidolon Wall.” Deftly, Freya leapt down to the cleared path and watched as Steiner painfully mosied his way back down. He let out a sigh as he pressed his boots back to the solid ground. “You take the low ground. Follow the path, look in all the crevices. I’ll take to the higher grounds.”

“Excellent idea,” The duo hurried on to the last remaining courtyard. Freya split off to the left, leaping highly above the pillars and to comb the area surrounding the Eidolon Wall. Steiner set off looking over the descreated walls of the once beautiful courtyard. He pushed brick away, which clattered to the ground in clouds of dust. As he turned to scan the area, he recalled all those years ago when he had first arrived to Madain Sari with Dagger. It had been an eye opener. And it had created a greater respect for the planet he inhabited. Maybe Sarah was right. Maybe this deserved to be rebuilt and restored.

Steiner sighed as his searched procured nothing and grimaced at the idea of the last remaining portion of the courtyard, which was a tall heap of rubble. Dark shadows reached over the rigid and uneven surfaces. He slowly approached it, taking his

time to secure his footing. His gloves scraped against the rock, sending pebbles to clunk off his helmet. Never did Steiner see himself doing this twenty years later. He figured he'd be getting too old for this. Yet, he persisted, out of his desire to be loyal to those who, he believed, had saved his life all those years ago. Steiner's hand grappled to the crest of the heap and with great effort, he pulled his weary self up.

When he did, he was face to face with a sideways and tied up, concerned looking princess. Her big brown eyes flooded with relief, however, at the sight of Steiner. And Steiner himself was overcome with joy. He scrambled onto the heap and knelt beside Bella, using a small hunting knife to cut her wrists and ankles free. She rubbed sorely at her blistering red wrists before she reached for the cloth around her mouth. Bella leapt towards Steiner, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I’m so glad to see you!” She cried out. Tenderly, he hugged her back. “I thought I’d never see anybody I loved again, Steiner.”

“We’re all here,” Steiner smiled, looking down at the shaking girl. “Come on, you didn’t think we would allow Kuja to take you from us, did you?”

Bella weakly grinned behind her tears. “I’m so sorry, Steiner.”

“Me, too, Your Highness.”

Sarah was propped up against the wall now, sipping on water. Fauna had passed out from exhaustion and slumped at an awkward angle from the table leg. Zidane sat in a chair, bobbing his knee. Eiko paced with a book in her hand. Dante sat beside Sarah, polishing a sword rather anxiously. And Beatrix pensively watched the door. It was creeping into the early hours of morning. Everyone had, at best, caught an hour or two of rest. Everyone’s nerves were shot. Many were at breaking point. The gauze taped to Sarah’s neck burdened Zidane and he sighed, lowering his head. How could he allow this to happen? Kuja was pulling all the wrong cards from his deck. He sincerely this time wanted to cut Zidane down by his knees. Kuja was right, though. Zidane *was* weak. He was incapable of protecting those he loved. And he had proven he couldn’t save what was left his family. The girls were slipping through his fingers, no more than mere strings of thread. Eiko paused, looking over the

top of her book at Zidane. He was a wreck. And she was drowning in guilt.

The door flung open in the next moment and everyone tensely gazed that direction. Freya appeared from the dark night, tilting her hat up on her head. She stepped aside to allow Steiner to squeeze by. In his arms, he held a small and meek looking Princess Bella, whose cheeks were rosy, her face dirt smudged, and her wrists in searing condition. Zidane was to his feet in a moment, racing to Bella's side. He enveloped her into him and he ran his hand through her knotted black hair. Bella closed her exhausted eyes, taking in the familiar scent of her father.

“Bella!” Sarah’s hoarse voice rang out and she staggered to her feet, pressing hand to Bella’s arm. Sarah’s eyes were wet as she smiled. ‘By the gods, it’s really you. We’ve found you!’ Sarah had Steiner place Bella down on a pallet and quickly, the oldest sister wrapped her in thin sheets, laying beside her. “Bella, you have to tell us everything you know.”

“Maybe she should rest,” Zidane suggested, kneeling beside Sarah.

“No,” Bella shook her head, propping herself up on her elbow. She gazed towards the incapacitated

Fauna and pursed her lips. She then looked to her father. ‘We have to go to the Iifa Tree, Daddy. It’s the source of all this chaos. The only way to stop it and truly be free is to stop Kuja.’ Zidane never thought he’d hear one of his daughter’s say this to him. He blanched at the very thought. “Even if we kill Fauna, there will be more of those like her. I’ve seen them. About a dozen of them. All dressed like Fauna and obeying Kuja’s command. I’m the only one who can unseal the Iifa Tree. But together, we can stop him.”

“Wait—” Sarah shook her head. “You ran away from home because...”

“Yes, because I’m the only one who can get in there,” Bella nodded. “I was going to betray Kuja. Learn enough about him, discover his weak spot.”

Beatrix crossed her arms over her chest. “Clever and bold plan for a thirteen year old.”

“Daddy, when you first encountered Kuja, what did his body look like?” Sarah looked over her shoulder.

“He looked human enough,” Zidane shrugged.

“That’s certainly not the case anymore,” Sarah shook her head. “When I saw him in my dream, I

saw inside his cloak for just a moment. He's all mutilated. He doesn't even look human. That may be our upperhand. We could easily defeat him in combat, up close. Kuja thrives on long distanced attacks. He wants to keep us at bay."

"By the gods, Zidane, have you been raising princesses or warriors?" Beatrix looked to him. Dante couldn't help but snicker.

"I have to do this, Daddy," Bella looked to him. "I'm the only one who can stop this."

Sarah pressed her hand to Bella's shoulder. "We have to do this. I'm not letting you go alone. I'm in."

"Make that three," Dante grinned.

"My duty is to protect the princesses, I shall follow," Steiner bowed his head.

"As representative of Burmecia, Princess Arabella and Sarah, you have my loyalty," Freya pressed her hand to her chest.

Beatrix smiled very weakly. "For Alexandria, Your Highnesses."

"If this is how the cycle of peace, harmony, and education is restored, I will fight for what I believe,"

Eiko told them, holding her book tightly in her hands. All eyes fell on Zidane now, who was quiet. His eyes had grown glossy and he looked between his two determined looking daughter's. Of course, his heart wanted to swell with pride. But he couldn't help but feel woefully angry that Bella and Sarah had to do this. The burden of the entire world had teetered off his shoulders and toppled onto their's. He hated himself in that moment, but he wanted to redeem it all.

"We have to do this," Zidane finally said. "We'll start making preparations. Training and healing. Kuja will know we're coming. But he can't stop us."

The sounds of a curtain scraping against a rod had the young girl stirring in her large poster bed. A bright light fell across her face and she furrowed her brow, turning her head away. She heard the sound of muted thuds against the floor and then the creak of a wardrobe opening.

"Princess Alexandra, it is time to rise. Breakfast shall be served within the hour," The maid said. Alex sighed. She was greeted by the sight of rain again. Nothing spoiled her mood more than constant

rain. She wanted to go outside, but that was never on the agenda of a princess residing in Burmecia, obviously. Alex sat up, her white night gown sagging on her. ‘Good morning, Your Highness,’ The maid greeted, pulling a green velvet and yellow silk dress from the wardrobe. “I trust you had a good nights rest. And I surely hope you’re hungry, Your Highness. We have prepared a special breakfast for you, little one.”

Glumly, Alex pulled herself from bed, looking to the dress presented outwards to her. Alex hated velvet. It was heavy and itchy. She thought she might as well wear the curtains instead. But her father had made her promise not to make a fuss and despite being a horrible mood, she did her best to comply. Alex began unlacing her night gown as the maid collected stockings and flats for Alex.

“I will need to modify the dress once you have it on, Your Highness,” The maid told her. “The tail hole simply will not be large enough for you. You see, my tail is so thin compared to yours. I’m like an olive branch, but you are an oak tree. You have a very nice tail, do you know that, Your Highness?”

Alex paused from undressing herself and looked to the maid. Never before had someone

complimented it before. She and her father, of course, had a special bond over being tailed-humans, but never had anyone so much as commented to the unique attribute. Slowly, she smiled, rather shyly. “What’s your name?” Alex asked.

“Arowyn,” The maid replied gently, bringing a set of dark gray stockings to be paired with dark shiny buckle shoes. “And I am humbly at your service as your caretaker, Your Highness. I wish to make your stay as enjoyable as possible.”

“Are there any kids around here I can play with?” Alex asked, stepping out of her night gown and pulling on the dreaded dress. To her surprise, however, the interior was sewn with silk, and the dress felt rather delightful. Arowyn zipped the back for her, offering the stockings out. Alex sat on the edge of the bed and began rustling into them.

“I’m afraid not in the castle.”

“May I go down to the city to play? Please?” Alex’s big brown eyes looked to Arowyn.

“I cannot let you leave, I’m sorry. Do try to understand.”

Alex sighed and nodded, reaching for the freshly polished shoes. The clack of the buttons snapping

together was satisfying to the princess, at least. She tried to look for the little things, like her father had always told her about. She stood now before Arowyn, who was smiling maternally at the child. She knelt and fixed the dress on her shoulders and looked to the back. gingerly, with a small pair of scissors, she made the tail opening just a bit wider and Alex's tail was able to come through.

"You look lovely," Arowyn grinned. "We have oatmeal prepared for you with the choice of strawberries, blue berries, oats, syrup, and chocolate shavings." It did sound very appealing to the young girl who had refused dinner the night before. Arowyn reached her hand out. "Come now, let's start the day right with a proper meal."

Together the two entered the wide and empty hallways. There were several crests, tarps, and paintings adorning the walls. The chandeliers cast ample light to fight away the darkness of rain. There were pedestals of artifacts and busts of renowned heroes and figures of ancient past. Alex still hadn't quite learned the lay out. It all seemed backwards from what she knew in bright sunny Alexandria.

"Tell me, Your Highness," Arowyn's light, almost mystical voice, rang out through the tall

rafters of the castle. “What do you like to do in your free time? Do you have hobbies or interests?”

“Can you just call me Alex?” The young princess gazed up at the tall slender Burmecian. The maid pursed her lips for a moment. “If you’re going to be my full time caretaker, we should be more personal, right? I will call you Arowyn, if you will call me Alex.”

“It... It doesn’t seem proper,” She shook her head. “Please, tell me what you like to do.”

“Well,” Alex huffed, watching as ahead, an archway began to take shape, leading towards the dining hall. ‘I like to play Tetra Master.’ Arowyn didn’t say anything. “It’s a card game.”

“Oh, yes, I remember now,” Arowyn nodded.

“Does anyone here play? I’d love to play against someone.”

“I’m afraid not,” Arowyn told her. “Children here are more interested in jacks and marbles.”

Alex hunched her shoulders in near defeat and thought for a moment. They appeared in the dining hall. The king and queen of Burmecia stood in the presence of Princess Alexandra. They greeted her

with warm grins. Alex looked to Arowyn. “Is there a piano in this castle?”

Arowyn chuckled lightly. “Princess Alexandra, music is a gift to the Burmecian people. It is but the essence of life and community; jubilation and total heartbreak. Allow me to find but the best piano for you, Your Highness. But for now, please, enjoy your breakfast. Perhaps you’d like to try our customary foods, as well. I see a freshly baked lemon bread on the table.” Arowyn smiled gently, giving Alex a pat on the back. The princess went on to breakfast for more of an appearance. Despite everyone’s cheerful and helpful attitude, Alex couldn’t shake the sorrow and fear she had for her family, that rattled her to her very core. Nothing seemed right, no matter how hard she tried to think about something else.

I wish we could all just go home.

27. Landslide

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bella and Sarah found themselves at the Eidolon Wall as the sun began to break over the horizon. The rocky ruins were bathed in pinks and oranges. Distantly, the roar of the ocean could be heard, washing over the smoothed down stone. The two sister's sat beside the wall, gazing to an inscribed note directed at their mother.

*To my beloved daughter, Sarah
My life changed when you were born
You made me happy
These are things I want you to know.*

Sarah reached out and gently ran her hand along the rigid engraving. Overhead, a bird squawked. The two princesses were quite a sore sight. Scrapes, scabs, dried blood, and grime covered their faces and necks. Their hair was knotty and tired and growing frizzy with all the accumulating oils. Bruises adorned their arms and legs and pooled in rings beneath their glazed tired eyes. Never before had either of them been so tired. Or so wound up.

“Can you believe it’s been ten years?” Sarah’s voice was hoarse and scratchy as she looked to Bella beside her. Her younger sister held a blanket over her shoulders. She licked her scabbed lips and shook her head. ‘Sometimes... it doesn’t feel that long ago.’ Sarah lowered her eyes. “But then some days... it feels like an entirely different lifetime.”

Bella shifted, causing some rubble to rattle. “Do you think our lives would have been much different if Mother had lived? Do you think... all of this still would have happened?” The princesses felt so hollow as they spoke. Inside, they reeled and grappled with their new realities and their new truths. Sarah was quiet for a few moments, picking at some dirt gathered beneath her nails.

“I don’t know...” Sarah finally said. She lifted her head, squinting against the broadening daylight. The gentle breeze blew a knotted lock of hair against the flushed frame of her face. “Maybe it’s best we don’t go down that route.”

Bella nodded rather dully, hunching her neck into the security of her blanket. “Sarah, I don’t really know how to unseal the Iifa Tree. Kuja only told me I was capable of it. What if he’s fooling us?”

“We won’t know until we try,” Sarah shrugged, watching the sky slowly lighten. Bella guessed she was maybe too exhausted to think that far ahead. But the very entanglement of the situation had Bella just as confused and overwhelmed. “Mother and Daddy took all kinds of chances when they were younger. Sometimes we just have to trust our gut and hope everything works out in our favor.”

Bella shifted on the ground, allowing the blanket to droop on her wiry shoulders. “I didn’t want you to get involved, Sarah. You have a pre-determined path of righteousness. You’re meant to lead the throne. You don’t need the burden of my destiny, too.”

“Bella,” Sarah looked to her. “You’re not destined to be the Goddess of Mass Destruction. You’re meant to lead Alexandria with me.”

“But why did you come this far for me?” Bella asked. “Why are you going with me?”

Sarah smiled softly, despite her lips cracking and bleeding. “Because... I want to.”

“Even though you might get hurt?” Bella seemed so utterly confused. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Bella,” Sarah reached for her younger sister’s hand. “When our mother died, I made a promise to myself that I would never let anything happen to you or Alex. Or even Daddy. I felt like I needed to make that promise to mother, so she wouldn’t have to worry. So she could move on to the afterlife and be happy and at peace.”

Bella was quiet for a moment, running her tongue over her rigid lips. “Do you think she’s at peace?”

After a beat, Sarah nodded. “I like to think she is, yes.”

“Me too,” Bella cleared her throat. “I just hope she’s not disappointed in me.”

“It’s not good to think like that,” Sarah said. In the next moment, she pulled herself to her knees, despite her entire body aching. She felt a slight tinge in her temple, but she looked to Bella, motioning for her to copy. “Come on, Bella. You’re a Summoner just like Mother was. We should pray to the Eidolon Wall like she did in her youth. It may bring us comfort. Maybe even guidance.”

Bella was still, sitting meekly amongst the rubble. “I... don’t want to be a Summoner sometimes, Sarah. It’s dangerous. And in a way, I

was apart of the unraveling. I don't want to do any more damage than I have to.”

“You won’t, I promise,” Sarah tugged her wrist and Bella complied, coming to kneel beside her sister. “I’ll pray with you, too.” Together, the girl’s tilted their heads down and closed their eyes. In their minds, their thoughts felt rather discombobulated. But the silence was something of bliss. Sometimes at the castle, they felt overwhelmed by the abundance of silence in the vast castle with long empty hallways and forlorn decorations. But here in the Eiodolon Wall, the silence was happily accepted, as they hadn’t realized their lives had been so absent of it recently.

From the entrance of the sacred grounds, Eiko watched, completely still. From the inside, she was chewed up alive by guilt and shame. But she admired the princesses of Alexandria that, despite everything, somehow found it in themselves to pull through. To not mope about, no matter how extenuating the situations. That’s the part of their father that truly shined through. Eiko sighed and turned away to leave the girl’s in peace. She walked down towards the courtyard, looking to the meager space that surrounded the crumbling fountain. She remembered the days she would play tag with the

Moogles, who distracted her from her grief and her hunger and her loneliness. Eiko had grown self-reliant amongst these ruins. Or so she had thought. She gazed towards the small lone adobe hut that had once been her's. The chimney was puffing. Slowly, she began to it, kicking rocks from her path. That's where Zidane was. And she felt like she needed to see him.

Zidane crouched towards the ground, scrunching the loose floor mat crooked on the floor. He gazed intently at Fauna's slumped body, dangling from the table leg like a wilted garment. Behind him, Beatrix stood against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest, watching with a pensive look. A beat later, Steiner appeared with coffee, handing it to the war general. The captain glanced towards Fauna. Zidane's tail was tense behind his back.

“Wake up,” Zidane said. Fauna didn’t stir. He reached out and tilted her head up. ‘Wake up.’ He demanded again, giving her a curt shake. Slowly, her eyelids began to flutter and her bleary vision greeted her. “Rise and shine,” Zidane said.

Fauna sat back against the table leg, her red hair falling in a mess around the frame of her crusty and grime smudged skin. Tensely, she looked around the room, to each facing staring back at her, full of stone. “You didn’t kill me...?” Fauna gazed at Zidane.

“Nah,” Zidane shook his head. “’Cause then we wouldn’t get to have what’s up there.” He pointed at her head. “You have information and I want it, Fauna. So talk. When did this all begin? Do you remember who you were before Kuja replaced your soul?”

The question was loaded and Fauna nearly winced at the words. Beatrix furrowed her brow, studying the now nervous quiver of the woman’s body movement. “I don’t know what you’re asking me. I’ve always been this way, Zidane. Kuja has always been there. He’s like... a father figure to me.”

“But he hasn’t always been there,” Zidane shook his head sharply. “Kuja’s been gone for seventeen years, Fauna. Think. Go deep in your brain and think. You had a childhood. A family. You were someone else before all of this. How long has it been since then?”

“You’re talking utter nonsense,” Fauna shook her head. “I was no one else.”

Zidane sighed, looking over his shoulder. “Beatrix?”

The war general promptly handed her coffee back to Steiner and reached for her backpack. She rustled about, pulling out a rolled up piece of parchment. She placed it into Zidane’s hand. The king gave Fauna one more look before he unraveled the paper, holding it up towards her. She held her breath, staring at it as if it burned her.

“That’s you, right?” Zidane looked at the parchment. “Drawing is pretty close. You even both have the same beauty mark beneath your right eye. It says you went missing sometime in the late spring this year. On the thirteen birthday of Princess Arabella, nonetheless. Says your name is Alura Weitz.”

A jolt of pain wracked through Fauna and she convulsed sharply against the table leg. Zidane stared at her, grounding his teeth together. Kuja was intercepting the information and the memories. If she couldn’t be Alura Weitz, he would have to talk to Fauna.

“What are your earliest memories with Kuja?” Zidane asked, dropping the parchment to the ground. The portrait of Fauna stared intently at everyone in the room, as if it had moving eyes. Fauna let out an uneven breath, looking to Zidane with wet eyes. How mysterious and elusive she had been all those months ago. So devious and deft, so well put together, like she was invincible. And now here she was at the breaking point, like all those who followed in Kuja’s wake, righteous or evil.

“I spent time with him at the Iifa Tree,” Fauna said, very softly, as if Kuja would hear. ‘He would tell me that I would have all the brothers and sisters imaginable. That I would never be alone again after what happened to my own siblings.’ Her face pinched as she was shocked again. Breathing rigidly, she continued. “He taught me how to be powerful. To never doubt myself. He brought forth promises of community and unity. A sacred group of people who would never turn me out as a black sheep. He told me of a true place to belong. I thought he was bringing the best out in me. And his ideas began to make sense. Why did so many people have to suffer in the world?”

“But he’s making people suffer now with his vile ideas unleashed!” Steiner interjected. Beatrix placed

a hand to his arm.

“I see that now,” Fauna said, shaking again with another flare of pain. “I did not feel much of anything until I had Arabella by her coat on the pier. For once in my life with Kuja... I was not in control. I could not stop myself from the will of his obeys. I thought I was simply to guide her there. Kuja always promised Arabella was not the crux of his plans. But he lied to me. And he proved it by recklessly endangering our lives with his magic boasted through me. And I still feel the effects. I want to hurt all of you, but I think I know that’s futile...”

“What did you put inside of Sarah?” Zidane asked. Fauna dipped her head for a moment.

“I don’t know what it does, honestly,” Fauna replied. “I just know it’s different from yours. More... advanced. Kuja wanted to use it on Arabella, but he changed his mind at the last moment.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know what he’s planning, Zidane. I’ve been captured. That’s why I say you need to kill me. It would be better than letting Kuja do it himself. He has already robbed me of my life, anyway.”

Zidane stood up and walked a few paces. Beatrix's eyes darted between the pained Fauna and the tense Zidane. The king shook his head. "There has to be way to revert you back. We have to make you Alura Weitz again."

Fauna convulsed in pain. "Please, stop saying her name!" She wailed.

The room was quiet besides Fauna's short breaths and sniffles. Beatrix pursed her lip, gripping her mug tightly. After a moment, she brushed out of the room, towards the balcony out back. Steiner shuffled his feet before he decided to follow after her. Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, listening to Fauna's cries. Inside, he was utterly conflicted. She was in no condition to travel to the Iifa Tree. But he couldn't leave her here. She couldn't fend for herself. And Kuja's power was overtaking her. She could get loose and come after them under Kuja's control. But killing her was completely out of the question. In a way, Fauna was also a victim swept up in Kuja's chaos. She most likely didn't go willingly with him under normal pretexts. He had misguided her like he had done to so many before. Zidane could only wonder why her, though? A normal Alexandrian girl whose family had been victims of the same plague that had taken Dagger from the

kingdom. Was there a correlation? Zidane blanched at the thought and a hot pain flashed across his forehead. He gripped his head, staggering into the cool adobe wall. Memories of Dagger in her decline assaulted Zidane. He staggered into a shelf on the wall, sending the books tumbling to the ground.

Eiko entered in the next moment and gasped sharply, coming to Zidane's side. She was able to ease him down to the ground as a sweat came over him. "Oh, Zidane, no! Not right now! Fight it!" Eiko dashed towards the table, grabbing a bucket of water. Hurriedly she began flicking it over Zidane, whose breathing had become labored as he laid on the floor. 'Zidane, don't give in! *Please!*' Eiko had tears in her eyes now as she doused his face in cold water, running her hands along his jaw. "We have to stop him, Zidane. No more suffering, please, please...!" Zidane's tired eyes looked to her, but she could see he was fading. Eiko's eyes darted over her shoulder towards Fauna, who only watched from where she was confined. "What do I do?! Please, tell me how I stop it."

Fauna only shook her head. "There's no stopping, Kuja."

Beatrix stared off towards the waterfall, holding her mug at her chest. She heard the familiar heavy footsteps of her partner and his broad shoulders filled the corner of her eye. She glanced to him and they were silent for a few moments, letting the roar of the waterfall fill the space between them. Despite sharing no words, there seemed to be a mutual conversation between them. Their troubled and tired eyes said it all. But Beatrix sighed and set her coffee down.

“We’re in over our heads, Steiner.”

The captain turned his brown eyes out towards the horizon of soft pinks of dawn cascading over the rigid line of debris. In his fifteen year marriage to Beatrix, there were very few times where Beatrix was ever wrong. But still, he didn’t want to believe that they weren’t capable of this. They couldn’t give in to that thought. For Steiner, failure absolutely was not an option. Not if he wanted to uphold the spirit of Dagger. Not if he wanted to protect the country he had sworn his servitude to. He had to protect what there still was. The princesses were everything to him and his allegiance to Zidane would never waver. But when he looked at Beatrix, he saw how apprehensive she was. For the first time ever,

Beatrix was doubting herself. The touted fearless war general was unsure of her step.

“You never finished your thought back in Alexandria,” Steiner looked to Beatrix. “What happened to your father, Beatrix? Why now, of all times, does that come back to haunt you?”

Beatrix sighed and shook her head, seemingly frustrated with the very thought. “Don’t you remember when my father was the war general alongside Brahne’s father? The Righteous War. The Prosperous War. Does it ring a bell?”

“... General Lafayette Divaron. But, you don’t share the same surname.”

“Of course not,” Beatrix said, bitterly. “I bare my mother’s maiden name.”

“Your father’s glory may have been spoiled in the Prosperous War, but this is different, Beatrix,” Steiner shook his head. “You’re not doing this for honor. We’re doing this for ourselves. To put to rest what keeps us awake at night.”

“When the rage boils over, will I know right from wrong anymore?” Beatrix furrowed her brow. “Will I be no better than the blind general who followed the Queen in the first war? What if I’m not good

enough to stop this, Steiner? What if I cannot protect the princesses? What will my oath have been sworn on?”

“Those are things that don’t need your concentration right now,” Steiner gripped her arm tenderly. “Right now we have one purpose, Beatrix. That is to stop Kuja, once and for all. We owe it to ourselves to make the world a place *we* want to live in. We’re more than just civil servants, Beatrix.”

“I value my life over no one else’s,” Beatrix shook her head.

“You told me you were scared of losing me?” Steiner arched his eyebrows. “Beatrix, I’m scared of losing *you*. I couldn’t imagine trying to even understand a life without you. Now is not the time to be conflicted. We have an uphill battle that requires all of our energy. We have to do this together. We need each other right now, more than ever.”

Beatrix was quiet for a moment, watching the waterfall foam at the narrow creek down below. Her tired brown eyes lifted to Steiner. “Why did we never have a family? I always thought you’d be quite a marvelous father.”

Steiner mustered a smile despite his rather sheepishness. “I have always thought the same of you.”

Beatrix sighed, pressing her hands into the railing. “I think I want a change, Steiner. I think I might... want something different for myself.”

“What do you mean?” Steiner tilted his head.

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” Beatrix shook her head. “I still need time to decide. I just would like to know... would you go with me?”

“Go with you where?”

“Just answer the question, Steiner,” Beatrix turned to him. “Yes or no?”

Steiner pursed his lips for a moment before he reached out, grabbing her slender hands. “Yes, Beatrix. I would follow you to the end of the world.”

Beatrix gazed up towards Steiner. “Thank you.”

Alex sat on the floor of her large guest room. Before her, the large glass pane sported nothing but the continuous dreary downpour over Burmecia. It

was nothing new. The young princesses fluffy skirt poofed out around her as she arranged and rearranged her cards on the floor. She alphabetized them, placed them in the proper class, and even ranked them based on power. Usually, her cards would bring her great solace. But as she continually shuffled the deck, it was to no avail to shut out the intruding thoughts in her mind. Every waking moment, she thought of her family. She wondered where her sister's were and what they were doing. She dreamt of her father every night. Alex dearly missed her father's warm touch. She missed his smile and his voice. She truly was a daddy's girl at heart and it was really beginning to show. Every day, she asked herself what she would do if no one ever returned. But she never had an answer and the very thought unnerved her.

There was a curt knock on the chamber door and it opened just a moment later. Alex didn't even bother looking over her shoulder. She continued to dangle her head, letting her curly blond locks fall around the frame of her face as she tilted the glossy cards into the misty evening light. She knew it was Arowyn. The only person who ever paid her any attention. And the only person who would enter her chambers. She heard the muted thuds of boots to the

floor and she looked up to see none other than the gentle caretaker whose maternal smile, sadly, offered no relief to the stressed Alex.

“Is it time for dinner?” Alex asked, pushing her hair from her face.

“Almost, little one,” Arowyn assured her in her light, almost mystical voice. “First, we have a treat for you.”

Alex’s face didn’t reflect much excitement. Arowyn had been briefed several times before the arrival of Princess Alexandra. She had been coached in the mannerisms and general interests of the youngest heir. What to expect, what she liked to eat, what time she went to bed. Arowyn had come to learn Alex was an excited child, seemingly easily impressed by nearly anything. But since her arrival, she had been a melancholy and moping mess. Rightfully so, Arowyn could only conclude. The nearly ten year old girl had been thrown headfirst into what a lot of people would call the real world. But it seemed so sudden and rash for the young princess.

Alex tucked her cards into her velvet pouch, tossing it carelessly onto the bed as she followed Arowyn out into the dreary hallways. Alex wanted

to go home. With her family. The frustration of not being able to was enough to reduce the girl to red faced cries and thrashing fists. She was so unhappy and discontent in Burmecia. She missed the sunshine. She missed playing games. She missed Alexandria and everything about her old life. It all seemed so long ago that they were happy. But it had only been a few months. Alex was lead towards the dining hall and she grew worried they'd planned some elaborate desert for her or even worse, a welcoming party.

But when she entered through the tall archway beside the slender Arowyn, she had to look around the room for a few moments to absorb what she was seeing. Several well-dressed Burmecians lined the long table, with the King and Queen sitting at the head. The women were drenched in jewels and velvets. The men wore long feathers and leather vests to emmulate dragon scales. They had not been served a meal yet. Instead, they all languidly swirled and tasted strawberry wine. It was a feast of nobles, Alex could easily tell. She had been in the presence of a few herself. All eyes turned on her upon her arrival. Alex felt her body flush with embarrassment and her tail grew straight as a rod behind her back.

Though they all seemed to smile without a care in the world, Alex was completely unnerved.

Arowyn reached down, curling her hand around Alex's shoulder. "Deep breaths, little one," She said softly. "No need to be afraid. The noble's don't bite. They're here for you, sweet one. Look, right over there, by the windows."

When Alex turned her head, she was in near awe at what she was seeing. She couldn't believe she had completely overlooked it when she first entered. It was a luxuriously large grand piano. It had a white paint that glistened, almost like a rainbow, beneath the misty light of the rain pelting the glass panes. It could have been a shell of an oyster, plucked from the bottom of the ocean, for all Alex knew. It was absolutely beautiful. It was much nicer than the one's she had played in many other castles when she had been looking to pass the time. And not far away sat a beautiful Burmecian girl, with ashen hair plaited into a fish braid down the nape of her neck. She sat poised beside a harp, awaiting the tinkling of the ivory keys. Alex's head snapped towards Arowyn, her eyes nearly bugging out from her skull.

"You... want *me* to play piano for all these people?!" Her cheeks grew hot at the thought. "I... I

just wanted a piano to practice on. I don't perform for other people!"

"They came to see you, Your Highness," Arowyn said, pressing her hands to Alex's shoulders and guiding her towards the beautiful instrument. "Now is not the time to doubt yourself. We are no strangers to the rumors of your enormous gift. Please, I beg of you... please play for us. To pass the time while we're all so... tense." She chose her words carefully.

Alex thought she might faint on the spot. But she looked towards the girl with the harp, who carefully polished the gilded edges of her instrument. She paused and offered a comforting smile to the young princess. Alex pursed her lips. Her entire body trembled as she looked towards the velvet piano bench. Alex never liked for anyone to listen to her practice. It made her nervous. How could they possibly expect her to play facing nearly thirty noble and royal faces?

Arowyn gave Alex another nudge and finally, the girl strode forward. The bench creaked beneath her. It sounded so absurdly loud and again she blushed furiously as she situated herself and reached her feet down towards the shiny pedals. She took a moment to orient herself with the keys. They were so

magnificently clean. Not a single smudge to be found. Alex wondered if anyone had ever even played it. Her brown eyes wandered over the top of the piano and she flushed again as she found several sets of eyes on her. Alex loved being the center of attention. But not like this.

“What shall we play, Your Highness?” The girl beside her asked.

Alex’s eyes hovered on the keys for a moment. “I’m sorry, all I know are Alexandrian hymns.”

“That is what we shall play, then,” She positioned her hands to the strings. “Which song, Your Highness?”

“Do you perhaps know the one... my mother composed?” Alex asked.

The harpist smiled very sweetly. “The Song of Memories, of course, Your Highness. You shall lead.”

Alex’s entire body shook like an earthquake and the tips of fingers were nearly on fire as she placed her hands down to the keys. She took in an unsteady breath, glancing to Arowyn who watched with a face full of support. Alex had never told her father she had learned this song. She played it in utmost

secrecy. In a way, the somewhat melancholy lullaby brought the only sense of her mother she could gather from the darkest corners of her mind. To be truthful, Alex didn't remember much about her mother at all. Not a single scent could procure a memory of her. And without her voice, Alex was realizing she was forgetting her mother more and more by the day. This song was her only connection. She hummed it when she was sad and when she played it on the piano, it sometimes brought forth an unearthly feeling to her. Like she was transcending space and time to be with her mother again, one last time. The feelings that weighed heavily on the princess seemingly seeped through the keys as the notes rang out across the dining hall. Everyone watched, truly mesmerized by the precise and beautiful gift of Princess Alexandra. The room lifted into happier spirits as the older noble's recalled the prosperous feeling post-war with Queen Garnet at the throne. Some were wrapped up in the idea that maybe those were the hey-days and that, possibly, it would never be that good again. But there was hope as they watched Queen Garnet's daughter play the piano, like a second nature, like the air in her lungs, with her heart smeared across her sleeve.

The harp plucked the last string and Alex lifted her fingers from the keys, listening to the last resonations of the piano fade away. She blinked rapidly, as if she was returning to the world and to the room. It only took a moment for the noble's and the royal's to come to their feet in a standing ovation. Arowyn clapped happily, beckoning Alex to her. The young princess came to her feet, though her legs felt like gelatin. Arowyn wrapped her up in a hug, preventing the girl from stumbling about like a fool. Arowyn presented her to the table, where the people clapped and smiled for her. Alex's eyes grew misty with tears as she looked amongst everyone. Soothingly, Arowyn gripped her shoulders and kept her steady. As the tears rolled down her cheeks, she finally was able to grin.

They're clapping for you, Momma. You deserve it.

28. Pressing

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Zidane awoke, he didn't have much knowledge of anything. An array of night time creatures began chirping in his ears. He became aware of the sticky sweat that plagued his skin. His thoughts were all discombobulated. For a fleeting moment, he didn't even know where he was, staring towards the domed ceiling that was bland in comparison to the gold leaf painted ceiling of his royal chambers. He hadn't slept in his own bed in weeks, that much sank in on him. Sarah and Bella's faces slowly filled the frame of his vision and only a moment passed before their arms tangled around his neck. Zidane felt as if he was emerging through a surface of water. His breath was shallow as he felt the cool skin of his daughter's against him. Meekly, after a moment, he wrapped his arms around their thin bodies, holding them close. He blinked rapidly, looking around the room. Fauna remained tied to the leg of the table, her face blank and grim. Eiko was pacing. Dante sat in a chair, only staring at the red headed girl slumped on the ground. Beatrix and Steiner spoke quietly to each other. Freya was knelt

close to the floor, using a mortar to crush a variety of dried leaves. Slowly, Bella and Sarah lowered their father back to the pallet laid beneath him. Tenderly, his eldest daughter brushed his hair away from his sticky face.

“Daddy, we were so worried,” Sarah told him, her eyebrows furrowing together. “You’ve been out for over an hour. It’s never been this long before. What happened?”

“I...” Zidane’s voice cracked for a moment as his eyes fell over Fauna. There was nothing in her eyes. She only stared at him, her chin tilted down and her stringy, knotty, and bloody hair fell around the frame of her face. Bella pressed a damp rag to Zidane’s forehead and he found himself looking at the dull ceiling again. “I guess I fainted...” Zidane said.

“It must have been Kuja,” Bella insisted. “What did he want?”

Zidane looked between his daughter’s who seemed worried. How bizarre it was to be on the receiving end of this look from them. Both of their faces were so grimy with dirt, compounded with dried blood, scrapes, and bruises. They looked as sore and pitiful as their own mother did during their journey two decades ago. It was hard to believe that

these girls used to be small babies he held in his arms. All that hovered over him now were two young women, growing up far too rapidly. Zidane only shook his head as he came to sit up. Bella and Sarah both reached for him, squeezing his arms.

“I didn’t see Kuja,” Zidane told them. Everyone in the room now looked at him. The crew had dwindled so much in the past few days since being separated at the docks. It all felt so foreign having those eyes on him. They gazed at him like he was in charge. Like he was magically supposed to know what to do. But he didn’t. And he had never felt more lost than he had in his entire life. How could he even think to march towards the Iifa Tree with his daughter’s on his heels? He wasn’t some teenager with nothing on the line anymore. Everything was on the line now. The stakes were much higher. The games much more pettier. And the vengeance was all much more exact. ‘I think I had a real dream for the first time in a long time.’ Zidane slumped his shoulders on his pallet. “It was like a lifetime of memories drifting past me... I saw Lindblum again, like I was seeing it as a kid all over.” Everyone in the room had paused now, breaking away from their own worried and disjointed thoughts. They watched the uneasy king, who had his eyes cast down. “Some

of my travels came back to me, too. The dwarves in Conde Petie, the Chocobos on that island..." Zidane smiled weakly. "I saw Vivi... and Dagger. I saw all of my daughter's being born again..."

"It was Kuja, dammit," Eiko sneered from where she stood by her old bookcase. "He's trying to break you down, Zidane! The weaker you become, the stronger he is. This is all part of Kuja's elaborate game of tricks!"

In the next moment, Sarah cringed for the slightest second. Her head jerked and she recoiled back, hunching her shoulders. Zidane reached for her wrist, steadying her on her knees. "Sarah? What is it?" The young girl blinked rapidly as a rush of blood came over her, blanching beneath her skin.

"N... nothing," Sarah was rather winded. 'I think a headache is coming on, that's all.' She shook it all away in the next beat, looking around the room. "We have to do something. Time is passing and we are dawdling. We need to go to the Lifa Tree and confront Kuja once and for all." Sarah was still for a moment. "Daddy, I think you should stay here. Kuja knows too much about you. All your weak spots. And Kuja told me in a dream... he was only able to

get to me there by learning about me... through your experiences.”

Zidane shook his head without hesitation. “Absolutely not. I am not sitting this out. Who do you think I am? That’d I send my own daughter’s off to finish what I couldn’t do.”

Sarah pursed her lips, her eyes becoming hard. “You’re not well, Daddy,” She said with a very even tone. Then she got up, dusting her pants off rather futilely. Sarah grabbed her backpack that was slumped against the wall and promptly slammed it on the table, making Fauna lurch from where she was restrained. “If something like this happens to you, we’ll not have near enough medicine to care for you. Or even a shelter. We shall elect someone to stay behind with you and the rest of us must move on.”

Zidane staggered to his feet, coming towards the table. Shiftlessly, Dante removed himself from the chair between them, going towards Bella who watched with his a still and solemn look. “Sarah, now is not the time to try and take charge. We’re in up to our necks right now. This party can’t afford to lose two people. We have no idea what’s waiting for us on the other side of that seal. There could be an

army. And for all we know, you might be unwell, too.” Sarah felt the bandaged wound on her neck pulsate. And then her skull vibrated. A wave of feelings overcame her that she had never felt before. Something she couldn’t quite discern.

“Well, then, let’s go,” Sarah raised her gaze to him and the stony look in her eyes hurt her father. “It’s nearly daybreak. There’s a whole day of walking to be done.”

Zidane had never seen Sarah so tense. He could sense she was furiously angry. She stuffed things into her backpack with a rigidness that was much different from her usual tender grace. But he had to take into account all the factors. She was probably exhausted and in pain, hungry, and feeling generally unwell. He remembered all too well the aches and pains of their own journey all those years ago. Looking between both his daughter’s, again, he was drowned in the guilt of subjecting them to this.

Sarah snapped her backpack closed, tying it off. “Let’s go.”

Beatrix came forward now. “What do we do about her?” She gestured to the broken woman crumpled on the floor. Upon feeling the king’s gaze, Fauna lifted her head to look back at Zidane.

Occasionally, a twitch came over her and she ground her teeth together.

“Kuja knows of my deviation,” Fauna told him.

“You’ve been shocked by the same thing as me and Sarah, haven’t you?”

“We’ve all been chipped, yes,” Fauna nodded.

“Kuja told me it was in my bloodstream,” Zidane shook his head.

“A chip,” Freya echoed, looking to Zidane. “Then that means we can surgically remove it. Fauna, are you certain it’s not a blood disease?”

“Kuja is synthesizing a way to make it biological. For his... new world. But for now... it’s only a chip in your neck, waiting to be dissolved into your bloodstream.”

Eiko came across the room now, kneeling in front of Fauna. “How much do you know about the insertion? How far does the chip have to go? Where is it on the neck?”

Fauna’s green eyes looked between everyone’s face. “What, are you all doctor’s? Do you seriously think you could pull it out of yourself?”

“Not me, but Eiko, Beatrix, and Freya,” Zidane told her. “They are trained medics.”

“Please, tell me where it goes in the neck,” Eiko touched her leg.

“I don’t know any of that, I’m sorry,” Fauna shook her head. “The chip goes where my hand strikes first.”

“You wrapped your hands all the way around Zidane’s neck,” Beatrix said. The prisoner glanced to the flesh thin scar running around Zidane.

“... That one is in his jugular, I know for a fact...”

“No...” Eiko dipped her head. “That’s too high risk, Zidane. You’ll probably bleed to death...”

“If you defeat him, the chip will be rendered useless,” Fauna whispered.

In the next moment, Zidane drew his dagger and cut Fauna loose. He helped her to her feet where she leaned against the table for support. She raked her grimy hair back from her face, looking to Zidane. “Come with us. Fight with us,” Zidane said. “Help us take down the man who has stolen years of your

life and held you against your own freewill. You can be you again, Fauna.”

“She’s the enemy,” Sarah came forward now, her hands curled into fists. “She’ll betray us somehow! How could you even think to trust her?! Why do you have to be so nice to everyone?”

A wave of déjà vu came over Zidane. Dagger had said those same exact words to him once before... and it even was in Madain Sari, as well. “We can trust her, Sarah. She’s a victim, like us. We need all the help we can get. And she has information that we don’t.”

Sarah bit down on her lip and looked hard at Fauna. “My father may trust you, but that doesn’t mean I do. One mistake and I will not hesitate to draw my sword.” And with that, Sarah promptly turned on the balls of her feet, brushing past Dante and out into the breaking dawn. Zidane watched her go, walking with determined purpose, carving a path of anger in her wake as she steamed away. He blinked rapidly, looking around the room rather dazed.

“Try to understand, Zidane...” Freya began packing her medicines and herbs away. “She is young and this is hard... I know that behavior. It’s a

young woman grieving the loss of the life she once knew.”

An uneasy feeling was blossoming in the pit of Zidane’s stomach, however. He nodded to Freya. “I hope so.”

It was warm as morning passed. The party traveled across the wide plains of the Outer Continent. Birds squawked overhead and the ocean waves crashed nearby. Zidane could distantly see the tree tops of the Black Mage Village and in the foggy mist of the morning, he could vaguely make out the shape of Conde Petie lurched between the mountain ridges. It felt like he was almost experiencing it for the first time all over again. It felt like an entirely different lifetime ago. And in that moment, he craved desperately to be with the people he once was. The innocent eyes of Vivi, the searching gaze of Dagger... it all felt so surreal to him in that present time. Part of him wondered if he had even been so lucky to have actually experienced that. When his eyes fell over his daughter’s, he only could feel his insides constrict. How could he let this happen? Dagger would be so disappointed in him, he was certain. When he looked between the side of

their faces, he fleetingly relived the memories of them being born. Sarah was a much more laborious birth, like Alex, but Bella had been relatively simple. Zidane would forever admire Dagger for her perseverance through all those pains and aches. After all, she gave him the greatest gifts of all: Their three daughters. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

Fauna appeared beside Zidane. She was obviously in pain as she worked harder to keep up with the group. He glanced at her, remembering all those months ago when they had seen each other at the theater. It had all been on purpose, Zidane recounted. She was supposed to be there that night to confirm Kuja's suspicions, even his powers. She raked her heavy knotted hair from her face and looked at the king. "Can I ask you something?"

Zidane stepped around a large rock in the path, gripping his backpack strap. "Shoot."

"Do you think destiny is set in stone... or do you think it's only an option?"

Zidane was quiet a few moments. Some of the others glanced towards them, also patiently awaiting Zidane's answer. Eiko was tense as she walked

alongside Bella. “I don’t know... I try not to think about it very much.”

“Do you think you were meant to be a king?” Fauna asked. “Or do you think you’re only delaying the inevitable of who you were meant to be...?”

The crunch of boots to the sandy, gravelly path echoed out around them. Zidane looked around, noticing Sarah seemed irritated just by the noise of Fauna’s voice. He pursed his lip, watching his daughter kick pebbles along the faded road. “Are you talking about me being... the Angel of Death?” Zidane asked, glancing to Fauna.

“With my earliest memories of Kuja... I remember so desperately wanting to be the apple of his eye,” Fauna nodded. ‘He was like a dear older brother to me, looking after me in what I believed to be my vulnerable hours. And yet, he always spoke of you, Zidane.’ The king could feel himself flushing at the thought. Even his daughter’s seemed unnerved by the idea. “He always talked about how he would have his time with you again, telling himself it could never be the last time he saw you all those years ago...”

“I had a feeling that maybe I’d see him again one day,” Zidane replied, his eyes trained forward.

‘Maybe there really is no escaping fate, no matter how desperately you try. We may do everything we can to deviate, to try to change things... but maybe this is how it’s supposed to be.’ Zidane shrugged. “Maybe I will always be that Angel of Death, bringing misery and destruction with me in all my wakes... and no, I don’t think I was supposed to be King.”

“Daddy, but how could you say that?” Bella looked over her shoulder now with her smoldering brown eyes. “You’ve always been wonderful as a father and as a king.”

Zidane smiled crookedly, casting his eyes down. “Yes, but honestly, Arabella, it wasn’t meant to happen. Your mother and I were never meant to be together. How it happened, I still don’t know. How I could make someone like that fall in love with me? I’ll never have the answer. I’ll forever cherish it happened, though.” Zidane strode forward, wrapping his arm around Bella’s wiry shoulder. “And you three are the most important thing to me now.”

“Fauna, it would be best you were quiet now,” Came Sarah’s sharp voice. She barely even cast a glance at the achy woman, her blond locks beating against the frame of her face. “We don’t need

distractions, we need focus. There's a large hand at task, it'd be good we all keep our wits.”

“We have a long day of travel,” Fauna tilted her head back to the sun. “Passing time would be nice...”

“I said be quiet,” Sarah turned sharply on her heels, facing Fauna with a reddened face. “You’re not even supposed to be traveling with us. I don’t trust you, so quit speaking. For all we know, you’re feeding it all back to Kuja!”

“We all are,” Fauna shrugged, looking down on the sixteen year old girl. “You, me, your father... he’s inside us—”

“I said to be silent!” Sarah brandished her sword now, stepping back and swinging it towards Fauna’s neck. With quick precision, the sword rest just against the skin of her jugular. “I don’t need your useless font of information in my head. I want to know nothing more about you or your story. You’re no victim, you’re a villain.”

“Sarah,” Zidane came forward, but she turned her sword on him, aiming lower, towards his chest. Zidane held his hands up, back pedaling from the fuming young woman.

“I’m sick and tired of you butting into all of my affairs!” Sarah roared, holding her sword out at arms length towards her father. “Will you ever let me be Queen one day or will I be babysat for the rest of my days?! We’re in the middle of a crisis and all you want to do is bide your time, Daddy. The clock has run out. There is no more time.”

Zidane glanced to Fauna, who was studying the back of Sarah profusely. He pursed his lips. “These are the effects of what you put in her, isn’t it?” Zidane asked as the sun glint off his daughter’s sword. “She’s aggressive now.”

Sarah stepped towards her father, lowering the sword down to get closer to his face. “You’re always talking over my head! As if I’m not as old as Mother was when she took the throne. You treat me like a child. I am this kingdom’s future. I am my mother’s legacy. I will not stand idly by and let these terrible things in the world happen. Not when I’m supposed to don the crown and own up to my responsibilities. I want this over with! Don’t you get that?!”

“Sarah...” He began to reach for her but Sarah drew away, raising her sword again with misty angry tears in her eyes, her jaw clenched to stop the tremors. The sharp end with its garnet encrusted

steel came to rest at the base of Zidane's sternum. He felt the tip against his skin and he shivered at the very idea of what was happening before him. In the past, Kuja had hurt those close to him and it wounded him deeply. But to see it happen to his own children... Zidane could only tremble. Kuja was taking it too far.

"Do you really want this to be over with?!" Sarah asked, her voice scratchy and uneven. "You've hidden away from it for so long, hoping it'd all blow over, shuffling your feet, thinking you have to go through all the motions... what happened to the father I was told of in tales who would take it all head on without a moment of hesitation? My father wouldn't waste his time holding a conference to bitch and moan when he knew what was happening. But you denied it all and look where you've brought us. We're at the end of the line, Daddy. It's the last call."

"Sarah, don't let yourself believe for a moment that this is how I wanted it," Zidane struggled to keep his voice even as he stood at the other end of her sword. "Don't let him win, Sarah. We're both going through the same thing. Don't you see he's trying to tear us apart? You said back in Madain Sari that Kuja would be weak against a close encounter.

That's what he's trying to prevent. We can overcome it together. Let's just try, Sarah."

Sarah faltered for just a moment, lowering her sword. Zidane looked to her eyes watching as they became dewy. But in the next beat, the flashed into hot anger. Sarah ground her teeth together and let out a shout as she reared her elbow back. It was all slow motion for Zidane as he watched the sword draw back before suddenly lurching forward. But Dante was spry and quick, grabbing hold of Sarah's elbows and jerking her backwards. The sword clattered to the ground and Sarah fought against the restraint of Dante. Zidane's heart pounded in his chest. After just a few more seconds, Sarah suddenly calmed, dipping her head and blinking rapidly, as if in a daze. Dante's grip weakened and she slumped in his arms. Tenderly, he held Sarah against him and for a moment, Zidane only could picture Dagger in his.

"Pick her sword up quickly," Fauna ordered.
"Can you carry her?"

"Yes, of course," Dante said, bending to sweep her up bridal style. Zidane could almost hear the grinding of stone on stone at the Alexandrian Castle, Dagger's head bobbing against his shoulder.

Numbly, he reached for Sarah's sword and worked quickly to attach it to his backpack, pressed against his shoulder blades. He could feel the cool garnets seeping into his skin.

"We have to move and quick," Fauna told them. "Kuja is catching on. The Iifa Tree is not far, we can be there by sunset."

And together, the party picked up the pace, crossing the dry and forgotten lands of the Outer Continent.

29. A Chance at Freedom

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Breakfast, early morning garden walk, private time with the piano, a light lunch, tea in the chamber... it had all become so monotonous for young Princess Alex. Even at the Alexandrian Castle they didn't have such a strict regime. Arowyn and the help of the castle didn't like when Alex just went wandering around. They seemed to always want eyes on her. She was sure her father had bestowed the utmost importance of Alex's safety during the grim trip, but Alex was certain he wouldn't want them to hover over her like this. Alex really only had a quiet and lonesome space during her tea time after lunch. During that alone time, the young girl found her mind buzzing with all kinds of thoughts. It had been nearly a week since her father, sister, and cared for companions had left the castle and yet there was no reported word of them or even a sighting after the very first evening they departed. Though Alex craved the alone time, she didn't like the ideas that spoke to her in the quietness. So during that time of the very sweet tea and rather bland lemon cakes, Alex shuffled her Tetra Master

cards around. She recited the animals off to herself and memorized their arrows and took the time to put together different decks for different brackets of gaming. She found investing herself in something menial proved to be the most helpful. Arowyn often commented on the lack of noise from the music room during her allotted practice time, but it was hard for Alex to admit that the resonance of a piano key reminded her fleetingly of a warm maternal touch that she did not recognize. And Alex didn't like the feeling it gave her. It was different when she played in the familiar space of her home castle. At the Burmecian Castle, however, with its highly arched ceilings and moody paintings, it only struck the girl with a bitter loneliness.

The seventh day, Alex found herself slumped in her chair at the table. The clock at the far end of the guest chamber ticked ever so faithfully. The crumbly lemon cakes gleamed in the afternoon rainy light and her warm tea kettle waited patiently to be tilted. But the princess was in no mood for tea and cakes. She thought about how Sarah and Bella were away on a real adventure, somewhere out there in the world. It smarted Alex right in her ego to know she was only cooped up in a castle all day, pampered and cared for and never left alone! Alex wanted to

go on her own adventure. Her tailed wavered behind her as she gazed around her chamber. Her eyes fell on the shiny leather pouch of cards on her nightstand. The princess paused for a moment, thinking hard and long. She was on her feet by the next thought, wandering towards the windows of the chamber. It wasn't very busy down below in the wet garden. She glanced towards the clock. If she waited until a quarter to one, just before tea time was over, she could catch all the guards at post-change. Alex grinned deviously. Then she could walk right out of the castle and find some real children who wanted to play Tetra Master.

Excited by the idea, Alex dashed towards the wardrobe, choosing a custom white dress with celestial gold embroideries that had been placed there by Arowyn. Alex figured all the girl's wore it. She grabbed a black cloak and hurriedly worked on braiding her blond hair into a pleat to fall across the nape of her neck. She changed her stockings to white woolen ones to fight off the puddles and selected black shoes to top it all off. Arowyn had left a canvas bag beneath the vanity mirror so that's where Alex gingerly tucked her cards away, pulling it over her shoulder. If she kept her hood low and her small pudgy hands tucked away, perhaps she could

pass as the baker's daughter who brought bread after lunch every day for a grand supper in the Burmecian Castle that evening.

Cautiously, she poked her head out the door like a rabbit emerging in spring. No signs of any help. The guards of the castle didn't seem to pay her much mind. She tucked the canvas bag beneath her cloak to not be suspicious. It beat against her hip as she fast walked away from her bedroom. Alex kept her eyes trained down as she followed the dark red rugs that ran the length of the hallways. She had always been tasked with memorizing castle halls. Luckily, the Burmecian Castle was not too difficult. There were only long curving stairs that slowed the small girl down. She picked her skirt up, clinging to the rigid railing as she descended beneath the chambers and onto the floor full of ballrooms, dining halls, and grand libraries. Alex froze, however. Across the foyer of winding staircases she spied Arowyn speaking to a maid with a basket of towels. Alex's eyes darted all around and quickly, she dove through the nearest door that was just a narrow hallway with many doors. It was rather bland compared to the rest of the castle. After a moment, one of the doors opened and a maid stepped out. Oh no, Alex could only think. She had found the castle's help corridor.

The maid recognized Alex immediately, gasping sharply. Alex felt she had no other option; she had to make a run for it. Alex raced forward, brushing past the woman who began making a ruckus. Rapid fire, doors began opening on all sides of Alex and her heart beat furiously in her chest. Still, she kept pumping her arms, not even daring to look back at the wake of help laying eyes on her. Straight ahead was another door at the end and she wasted no time leaping through it and hurriedly closing the door behind her, bolting to the right, towards a foyer that lead into the garden.

Alex staggered down the wet stairs, her breathing shallow as she took a sharp left, racing through the rain in the garden. If she wound this way, she knew she'd find a side guard gate that would release her into the lower canal section of Burmecia. Just a few blocks up, she would find a staircase towards the main quarter. Luckily, the gate was not guarded and Alex slowed her pace. She panted wildly, taking the time now to draw her hood back and looked around. She only heard the patter of rain to the cobblestone. Her bangs were wet, plastered against her forehead as the rain dribbled over her. Alex smiled through her heavy breaths and triumphantly she pushed the gate open. She could have her own adventures, too.

As she kicked the gate closed behind her and began down the narrow path beside the canal, she couldn't help but relish in the idea of being all on her own. Someone always was with her, whether she was here or at the Alexandrian Castle. At nine years old, there was always one large protective bubble around her. But as people walked by her without even a glance, men steering boats down the canal waving, Alex just thought how amazing it was. Her father had grown up doing this. Alex wanted to desperately as well be a normal person. Why couldn't she be normal? She pulled her leather pouch out, watching the rain run down its slick surface. She smiled and hurried ahead, running up the stairs towards the main plaza. Several children were playing marbles. Because it always rained, everyone carried on with normal life like it was a beautiful day outside. Some girls skipped rope beside a shop with a meager awning. A few other children hooted and hollered as they spun tops across the gleaming wet stone. But sitting beneath a large steel cover was a group of boys, each furiously sifting through cards. Alex grinned. Jackpot!

Quickly, Alex made a bee-line towards the Burmecian boys. She stood directly at the end of the uneven picnic table, smiling widely. "Hi! I see

you're playin' Tetra Master. Can I join? I have my own deck," Alex held her pouch up. The boys looked at her as if she had grown two heads.

"Who are you?" One asked with his congested voice.

"My name's Alex, I'm just visiting!"

"You don't look anything like the people who visit us," Another commented.

"Not true!" Alex furrowed her brow. She shifted her cloak, exposing her tail. "We have some things in common!"

"Girls don't play Tetra Master," The third one said, matter of fact.

"That's not true, either," Alex shook her head. "I just want to play. My father has many business meetings, I'm horribly bored. And I brought my deck all the way from Alexandria!"

"Alexandria?" The boys said in unison, glancing at each other. "You must have one of the newest sets! It's only in Alexandria!"

"Oh, yeah, the Kilzorg Set?" Alex arched her eyebrows. "I'll let you guys play with some if you

let me play a few rounds. No swapping cards at the end, let's just play for fun, so the stakes aren't high."

"You'd let us touch your new cards?" One of the boys raised his ashen brows.

"Yeah, if we can just play!" Alex agreed. Eagerly, one of the boys scooted over to make room for her on the bench and she smiled, slapping her pouch down on the table. "Thanks!" She said as she unbuttoned her case, withdrawing her shiny deck. The boys all craned their necks to get a good look as she shuffled them about.

"So, you're from Alexandria?" A boy asked her. Alex nodded. "What brings you to Burmecia?"

"My dad has business here," Alex said, divvying her cards up.

"You look familiar..."

"You guys said yourself that people like me don't typically visit," Alex looked between them. How dearly she just wanted to have a card game. "Let's play. Whose first?"

Dusk had descended upon the Outer Continent. The wind howled, the sky a mix between moody purples and awe-striking oranges. The wind whizzed by Zidane's ears, his blond hair just brushing his skin. Across the jagged rocks, twisted up roots lead towards the massive Iifa Tree with it's complex and winding trunk that lead towards the thick foliage of the top. Though the appearance didn't seem much different from all those years ago, something about it seemed so... different. It was almost as if it was a mistake seeing it, like it wasn't supposed to be there. It had been gone for so long. It was a monumental feat that Kuja, who had fallen beneath those tangled vines all those years ago, had been able to lift it back to its former glory. Zidane shuddered at the thought of those rigid vines coming down on him, scraping against his skin, trying to drag him away to his own personal hell. It wasn't the same, he told himself, as he found himself in a trance gazing towards it. Bella walked towards the curt edge of the cliff they stood on, looking down into the intricate system of earth colliding with earth. The wind lifted her inky black hair and she pursed her lips at the darkness descending below.

Eiko came to stand beside Zidane. Freya, Beatrix, and Steiner looked all around them on high alert.

Dante lowered Sarah down against a mound of rocks, placing his backpack behind her head. Her face occasionally pinched in pain and she nodded off a little, clinching her temples. After a moment of watching Sarah in pain, Dante took his own turn to look around. He became very still when he saw the Iifa Tree. He had never seen anything quite like it. A tree of this magnitude could only be an urban legend in Dante's mind. But here it was in front of him, very real. The wind whistled past everyone's ears. It was very quiet and unmoving around the group. Several of them were confronted with abrasive memories. Steiner only trembled, knowing it was Queen Brahne's last stand and a place with memories of Dagger, echoing off the branches and floating like dust towards the ocean. For Eiko, it was a sacred ground with a holy mar. Zidane looked around at his sore crew. Exhaustion was rearing an ugly head. Everyone was so tense. Zidane didn't look to a single person who seemed to be clear headed. Even Beatrix herself was foggy and somewhat aloof.

Eiko stepped forward, extending her arm out. Zidane's boots crunched through the dirt. "Hey, what are you doing?" He reached for her, grabbing

her by the wrist. “This isn’t the same kind of seal, Eiko. It might be dangerous.”

Her wet blue eyes came to look at Zidane. “This used to belong to my people... a civilization that understood it. Now look what it has become: a throne for the sanctity of evil. Zidane, it’s sickening.”

“I know...” Zidane was numb, his grip loosening on Eiko.

Sarah sat up, her face pale and grimy with sweat. “What are we waiting for!? Bella, break the seal!”

Bella looked towards her sister, clutching her heavy coat close to her wiry body. “I’ll try, Sarah...”

Zidane released Eiko, turning to his daughter. “We have to be cautious.”

“I know, Daddy.” Bella stood next to Eiko now.

“The seal is here,” Eiko nodded. “I feel the energy. Don’t you?”

“A tingling sensation,” Bella looked to Eiko.

“Kuja said you could break it...” Zidane came to stand beside Bella. It was like looking at a mirror of Dagger. Those round brown eyes and olive

complexion, the short raven hair clawing at the frame of her face. She was the epitome of her mother. And while Zidane was thankful one of their children bore a resemblance to her, in that moment of time, it was almost painful to look at her. Bella, herself, was at her edge. Sarah's unusual behavior perturbed her. Sarah had always been the level-headed and graceful sister; something Bella had always been envious of. But now, with Sarah seemingly unhinged, Bella found herself at the forefront and she was downright nervous. Bella reached for her father's hand, giving it a squeeze, which he returned. Zidane licked his lips. "Did he tell you how?"

Bella shook her head. "No. Nothing specific, anyway. He just said that I could." Slowly, she also began to reach out but Zidane wrapped his arms around her. "Daddy, we won't know unless we try," Bella cocked her head back to look at him. Zidane held her tightly by the shoulders, trying to convince himself he could still protect her. But one look at her eyes showed she so desperately wanted things to be normal again. She wanted this over. Zidane pursed his lips, holding onto her tightly. He wanted it over, too. Slowly, Zidane nodded to Bella and the teenager was still a moment before she brought her hand

forward. The entire group all held their breaths in great anticipation, the Iifa Tree looming over them.

The moment Bella's hand touched the seal, it rippled. It was a disorienting sight. Both Zidane and Eiko's stomachs twisted at the thought of those wavers. It was almost like they were supposed to fall through into their past lives at any moment. Eiko expected to become a stout six year old and Zidane could feel the presence of Dagger seeping through his skin as Bella pressed both palms flat against the invisible force. What an odd feeling it was. Bella couldn't even begin to explain the weird ache growing through her body. Dante watched with a knitted brow and intense dark eyes. He never thought he'd bear witness to events such as these or see the world from this perspective. While he was always aware there was a mystical nature to the way of life on Gaia, he would never imagine he'd bear witness to it. In front of Bella, a dark purple shimmer was beginning to vibrate from her hands.

"What's happening?" Freya asked, looking all around. The barrier was flat and tall and the purple streaks shot upwards.

"Arabella is communicating with the wall..." Eiko took a few steps back to inspect the pulsations.

“I can hear it, too.”

“It’s an Eiodolon?” Zidane furrowed his brow.
“But Kuja...”

“It’s Ramuh!” Bella exclaimed before a bright light came between her palms. Everyone cringed against the flash, tilting their heads away. After it subsided, Zidane found himself blinking rapidly. In the cupped palms of Bella’s hand now sat the periodot shard that contained Ramuh. As it glinted faithfully at her and for a moment, Bella’s eyes scanned over the dark scar that now reached across her wrist. That fateful night on Sarah’s sixteenth birthday had her shivering. It seemed so long ago, but in reality, it had only been a few mere weeks. ‘He’s come back to me,’ Bella looked to her father and he saw the first glimmer of excitement within her for the first time in a long time. “I thought he was gone forever but it’s him, Daddy... the Eiodolon who served Mother.”

Sarah’s boots crunched through the gravel as she stood. Dante reached for her, but effortlessly, she came forward, staring intently at the Iifa Tree. She then reached for Zidane and he felt a tug as she loosened her sword from his backpack, replacing it on her back. Her face seemed relatively relaxed and

Sarah's eyes conveyed a sense of clear headiness. Still, though, Zidane was on pins and needles thinking about their journey heading into the Iifa Tree. What awaited them in those twisted roots and dark barks? Nothing good, he worried. The silence surrounding the party was eerie. Where was the chaos? The turbulence? Kuja couldn't really be holed up in this tree all by himself. Zidane turned, looking between everyone's weary faces.

"We should rest," Zidane said, looking upwards the waning sky of pinks and oranges. "A good night's sleep will do us all some good. We should eat what we can, too."

Beatrix nodded. "Steiner and I shall find some wood."

"I have some herbs for everyone and some naan bread to roast over the fire," Freya said, setting her rucksack to the ground.

"I'll keep a look out," Dante perched himself on the slope of a mound of rocks.

"I'll help," Sarah said, sinking into the rocks beside him.

"I think I'd just like to sit down," Bella said, somewhat wearily. Zidane worked on creating a ring

of rocks as Eiko and Bella propped their backpacks up behind them. Bella's knotted black hair fell away from the frame of her face as she looked to the beginning inklings of stars breaking out across the sky. Fauna watched the crew busy themselves before she walked a few paces, seating herself at the edge of the cliff and allowing her legs to dangle over the abyss. She glanced to the twisted rooms of the Iifa Tree. Zidane noted she still observed the barrier of the seal. Bella unfolded her hand, holding the shard of the periodot above her. She felt a surge of energy for a fleeting moment.

"Ramuh is happy to be back with you, Arabella," Eiko tilted her head against the rugged felt of her backpack. She and Bella's face were only inches apart. Zidane glanced to them as he continued to arrange the rocks for the fire. "I can hear him. Can't you?"

"Faintly," Bella told her. "I guess if I had a horn, it would be louder?"

"Maybe..." Eiko's blue eyes looked to the sky. "Your mother wondered the same thing."

There was silence as Beatrix and Steiner returned with wood and Zidane efficiently had a fire crackling. Hot embers spurred upwards to the rapidly

darkening night. In the orange glow, Dante watched the rather solemn Sarah before he gave her a nudge with his elbow. She arched her eyebrows, looking to him. He could see she was rather drained. Her eyes lacked any spark or spunk, her blond hair was grimy and her face was faint with bruises and chapped lips.

“This is going to be a stupid question but... are you alright?” Dante asked, hugging his knees. Just below the incline of rocks they sat on, the group hovered near to the fire as darkness descended around them. Beatrix and Steiner unfurled blankets. Zidane glanced to Fauna, who kept her back to the group, silently watching the looming figure of the Iifa Tree.

Sarah sighed. “Something is wrong with me, Dante...”

“We’re going to fix it, though,” Dante raked his oily brown hair from his face, looking to Sarah. “Tomorrow, I promise. This can all be over.”

“What if I’m like this forever?”

“Like what?”

Sarah’s gloved hands tightened around the pleated pants hugging her thighs. “I feel weird, Dante. Like at any moment I could have an

emotional outbreak I can't control. I've never felt like this before. The worst part is... I can't even explain it."

"Well, I can," Dante said, watching as Freya flattened her naan bread against rocks to place near the fire. "It's Kuja. He wants you to feel this way. Like your father said, he's trying to turn us against each other. But we won't let that happen."

Sarah watched the side of Dante's face that glowed in the nearby campfire. His tanned skin was like almond butter, his shaggy brown hair falling heavily over his pointed ears and round face. She pursed her lips, looking towards the dark figment of a tree. She had heard much lore about the Iifa Tree and she knew it resounded heavily in the memories of her family. But in that moment, she only felt frustrated. And she was only more frustrated by that frustrating feeling. She figured she should feel relieved that they would be confronting the nightmare that loomed over them, but instead, Sarah only felt frightened by the thought. What would life be for her once they moved past this? Would Sarah ever be able to truly move on from these chaotic events of her life?

“I think I’ll just go to sleep,” Sarah said, dipping her boot down to descend to a flat surface.

“You should eat,” Dante told her.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Sarah, tomorrow’s an important—”

“Stop acting like my father,” Sarah looked to him now with intense blue eyes. “I don’t need another father, Dante.”

The young man was quiet, reliving the fleeting memories of Sarah drawing a sword on Fauna... and then turning it on her own father. He knew she was sick by Kuja’s doing. Dante knew deep down inside this was not who Sarah was. This was not the girl he had held and kissed on the thatched roofs of Alexandria. It was not the girl he saw blushing from across the dining table, reciting sweetly the words of Lord Avon. This was not Sarah he knew. Finally, he nodded.

“You’re right. Rest is important... I won’t be too far behind.”

Sarah didn’t say a word more as she clambered down to her backpack, situating it behind her head. Silently, Dante looked over the group hunkering

down but only felt the king's eyes on him. Dante met Zidane's blue eyes, feeling his own distress, which Dante shared. Tomorrow would be a long day. And no one who sat in that still whistling valley looked forward to dawn breaking.

The sky seemed to be darkening behind the forever present dreary clouds of Burmecia. Very few children straggled in the courtyard and the boys Alex had been dueling all afternoon showed signs of fatigue and hunger. One even had a very scratched-up and limy pocket watch that read a quarter to six. "We better go. My mum will have dinner ready within the hour." The other boys agreed and began scraping their cards together to stuff into the mis-sized felt bags they had found at a second hand sale.

"Aw, we're done?" Alex drooped her shoulders. She had been able to escape reality for a few hours. How the young girl wished for several more.

"It's been fun," The boy beside her said. "You're really good. Perhaps we can meet tomorrow?"

Alex's eyes brightened at the idea but were extinguished in one breath. She hadn't been very clever about sneaking out that afternoon. She was

quite surprised that no guards had come to round her up as they did in the Alexandria Castle, even when she was only in the garden. She didn't know what to expect upon returning. She knew, however, she had exceeded the privileges granted to her in forms of private tea times and music. While she wanted to promise the boys she would return tomorrow, she wasn't sure she could keep to it.

"Maybe. Same place, same time?" Alex arched her eyebrows, nearly longingly. Princess Alexandra had never had quite a true group of friends. She had been amongst royal and noble crowds of children her age through the years of balls, galas, and parties, but she never had had a lasting group of people who knew her truly and could relate to her. It was all the more delightful to be seen as a regular person to these boys. Just another civilian not at all related to a royal line of blood. The boys all nodded in response. "I hope I can come back... I never know where my father's business might take me."

"Well, if ya go to Alexandria and have some extra girl, get us a Kilzorg pack to split, will you?" A boy leaned eagerly in towards her.

Alex smiled almost painstakingly at the thought of the afternoon being over. After a moment, she

unsnapped the button of her pouch, pulling the newest deck out from it. “Let’s all split the cards,” Alex said, placing them on the table. “Everyone take two. That way, if we never see each other again, we have something to remember each other by.”

“Wow, really?!”

“Thanks, Alex!”

“You’re so cool!”

Alex grinned, watching each boy claim a pick. Their faces were so bright at the idea of even holding the cards. Alex could only hope they brought the boys great joy. Slowly, she pulled her hood over head, glancing around the nearly empty courtyard now. She climbed down from the bench, sheltering her card pouch beneath her cloak. She cocked her head to see out from beneath the pavilion, gazing towards the darkening sky that continuously rained, with no chance of it letting up. She saw the dark looming structure of the castle with its large warm windows. She had no desire to return but she knew she had to. Slowly, Alex inched closer to the rain, but one of the boys called after her.

They all still seemed to be gawking at their cards, but one looked to her intently through his bangs of ashen hair. “Where do you really live? How can we look you up?”

Alex smiled, pushing her cloak above her clear blue eyes. “I can’t really tell you... but I’ll be able to look you up, don’t worry. I’ll find you.”

And with that, the youngest heir to the throne of Alexandria turned and made her ascent into the rain that dribbled down her cloak and against the hem of her ceremonial white dress. She disappeared into the darkness, anxious to know what the end of her journey would bring. But she wouldn’t regret it one bit as she knew she’d be cozy in bed that night, thinking of the boy’s who gave her a chance at being normal... at being free, from the dreary life that now plagued her, away from the constant worry that nagged her... She would always cherish that rainy afternoon in Burmecia. Even though she’d never have anyone to tell about it.

30. The lifa Tree, Pt 1

Chapter Thirty

The sound of a butter knife grinding over the rigid surface of toast was the only thing to be heard in the bedroom chambers that morning. Alex sat at the small table, not at all surprised that breakfast was brought to her. Arowyn was busy preparing the breakfast. She was quiet and ever so graceful as the marmalade spread across the triangular toast points. She then worked on sprinkling sugar in a bowl of raspberries and blueberries, using her slender fingers to mix the berries together. The sugar gleamed over the surface of the fruit. Arowyn glanced to Alex as she reached for the fresh apricot jam, giving it a stir before gingerly smearing it on the smothered butter toast. Alex was silent, pressing her back into the chair, watching as the woman dutifully prepared the breakfast. Alex held her tongue, knowing it wouldn't be wise to object to having her breakfast assembled for her. The chamber door opened and soundlessly a maid brought a tray to Arowyn, passing a bowl and small ramekins along to the ever dutiful head maid. The third person left just as quickly and Alex longingly watched as the door

swung shut. Finally, Arowyn finished arranging the meticulously prepared breakfast and pushed it across the table towards the young princess. Alex was still, her dark eyes only looking over the ramekins of carved butters to resemble lily's of the valley and the neatly stacked pile of black pudding. She glanced only fleetingly at the grilled tomatoes and poached eggs. She instead reached for the honey tea that sat in the far corner of the silver tray. Nervously, Alex threw a look towards Arowyn who was also very still and quiet. Her eyes had been trained out the window, but upon feeling Alex's gaze, she tore her eyes away from the familiar scene of rain gliding down glass panes.

Arowyn sighed, lowering her hands into the lap of her silky white dress. Her thin tail was straight behind her and her dark eyes fell on Alex who did her best not to squirm; or contort her face when the sweetness of the honey hit her full force from the tea cup. “You caused quite a stir in the kingdom yesterday, Princess Alexandra...” Arowyn said with her airy was amazed she didn’t come off as angrier. She was certain that Steiner would have blown a gasket at the idea of a princess making a ‘daring’ escape. “If I didn’t know better...” Arowyn shook her head. “We were moments away from a national

emergency, Your Highness.” Arowyn stood and folded her hands behind her back, going towards the window. The garden below now had many more soldiers occupying it. There would be no gaps in their patrol now. Arowyn sighed. “I don’t place these rules upon you to bore you, Your Highness. I am not trying to make this kingdom seem dreadful. There are simply a strict set of precautions we must take, Princess Alexandra.” Arowyn turned back to look at the young girl who still made no move for her breakfast. “Do you ever stop and think about how important you are?”

Alex set her tea cup down, trying to push away with the irritated feeling rising within her. “I don’t want to be this important!” She told Arowyn. ‘All I wanted to do was see some kids my age and play some games. They didn’t even know who I was, it wasn’t a big deal.’ Alex crossed her arms over her chest. “My entire family has gone missing! Do you really believe I just want to stay cooped up between the same four walls and think about it?”

Arowyn gracefully came towards Alex, placing a somewhat maternal hand to her shoulder. “Princess Alexandra, please, I’m not trying to upset you. I know these matters are unsettling but it is my job to keep you safe. And I shall try in the future to

perhaps make it more fun for you. Imagine if your father had returned yesterday and we didn't know where you were. It would have been a nightmare."

"But he didn't," Alex stood up now, putting enough space between them so Arowyn couldn't touch her. "And what happens if he never comes back? What if I never see him or my sister's ever again!? Will this be my life forever?"

"There is no need to discuss such plans," Arowyn told her.

"But there are plans," Alex furrowed her brow. It was quiet in the chamber for a few moments. The young girl was so wound up, her shoulders nearly deflated. She looked to Arowyn with a pinched look. The maid was hurt to see her so upset. Arowyn had promised her father she would be kept happy and comfortable. Of all the royal and noble children to come under her care, Princess Alexandra Alexandros-Tribal was the toughest case. Arowyn had met her match. Never had an heir such as herself made a blithering bolt for the door like a frightened cat. Never had the children been so resistant to sit-down meals of luxurious status. And never had they been so attached to a deck of cards. She was the oddest princess Arowyn had ever met. "What

happens if they don't come back, Arowyn? What becomes of me!?"

"Well," Arowyn folded her hands together, draped beneath her large bell sleeves. She walked back to the window. "You would become the new Queen of Alexandria."

"I'm not even ten years old!" Alex shook her head furiously, her curly blond hair beating against the frame of her face. "I can't be a queen!"

"There would be people to help you ascend," Arowyn looked over her shoulder soundlessly. "That would be the natural order, Your Highness."

"No!" Alex was yelling now, hot tears stinging her eyes. "I don't want to be the queen! There hasn't been a queen since my mother. The only rightful person for that seat is Sarah! I don't want the throne. I refuse!"

"Princess Alexandra..." Again Arowyn came towards the girl whose tears now streaked her rosy cheeks. "Trust me, child, when I tell you there is no need to discuss such things. I don't wish to upset you anymore. These are things we don't have to worry about right now. I do believe your father and

sister's will return, Your Highness. It's only been eight days. These things take time."

"And how many days have to pass before you all decide to crown me?" Alex's voice faltered.

"Let us eat breakfast before it grows too cold," Arowyn pressed a hand to her shoulder blade. Alex ground her teeth together.

"I'm not hungry."

"Please, Princess Alexandra..."

"How. Many. Days?" Alex's sadness had hardened into anger now.

Arowyn sighed, looking over the large collection of untouched dishes, ramekins, and silver utensils on the table. "By the order of the Alexandrian throne, a monarch can only be absent with no contact for twenty-two days before the throne is ascended by the next in line."

Alex felt cold at the idea. "So... my father only has fourteen days left before I become crowned...?" A low rumble of thunder rang out. Alex nearly shook in her flats. She crossed to her nightstand, grabbing the leather pouch of cards. 'I just want to be alone. May I please go to the library?' After a

moment, Arowyn nodded. The young girl was quick to dart across the room, but she paused fleetingly at the door, looking back to the maid. “Thank you for being honest... and actually, can I have one of those poached eggs to take with me?”

Arowyn smiled sweetly, grabbing the ramekin and presenting it out to the princess. She really had met her match.

When the pink rays of daybreak fell across Zidane’s face, he became horribly aware of how much pain he was in. Sleeping on hard grounds, fainting, hitting his head over and over... he felt as sore and miserable as he had in his youth. Now his neck had a crick in it for falling asleep next to a rock. It didn’t make for the best pillow. Achingly, he propped himself up on his elbow, blinking rapidly as he looked at the early morning light come through the dewy fog. All around him with the jagged rocks and twisted vines, it all looked so familiar. But at the same time, he felt as if he didn’t recognize a thing. It was so quiet. It was so unlike the world he had become accustomed to for the past fifteen years. How had he done it all those years ago? How had he managed to be fearless and brave? Who even was he

now? Zidane had never considered himself a king and yet he couldn't help but feel he was reacting to the situation like an aloof royal who had never had to do his own dirty work. When he turned his head to look at the Iifa Tree, he noticed for the first time that someone else was awake. Sarah sat at the opening of the narrow walk path, just on the other side of what the seal had protected. Her sword sat across her lap and mindlessly she picked at the encrusted garnets beneath his fingers. In that moment, Zidane could almost see Dagger. Even with her back to him, she reflected so much of her mother's mannerisms. She was almost staring at her down destiny, as Dagger had years before. Quietly, Zidane went to her, sinking down to sit beside her.

Sarah didn't even glance to him. She kept her blue eyes trained forward, her hand continually gliding up and down the smooth steel Dante had presented to her. A lock of her blond hair fell against her bloody cheek. "It's amazing something like this can even exist. It's beautiful." Nervously, Sarah reached for the Raven Claw pendant that dangled from her neck. "Daddy... We really made it... I didn't think we ever would."

"I know..." Zidane was quiet as he wrapped his arms around his knees. With the pink rays of the

morning light falling over Sarah, she had almost an innocent presence about her in that moment. Zidane was kicking himself on the inside that he had allowed himself to let things get this out of control. All of his daughter's had been affected by this. It made his stomach constrict in knots at even the slightest thought of Alex. The last look he had received from her, with her wet eyes and outstretched arms haunted him. He had betrayed himself, his family, his kingdom; and worst of all... Dagger. What would she say if she were here? Surely, she'd be calling him a blithering fool, unfit to have three daughters. And he couldn't help but think she would be right. Things had gone horribly off the tracks. He wanted a different world for his daughter's and all he had presented to them was misery, destruction, and chaos. "Sarah, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Sarah shook her head. "In a way, I wanted this to happen, Daddy."

"What do you mean?" Zidane furrowed his brow.

Sarah sighed, hunching her shoulders for a moment. "I don't know the full story of what happened all those years ago. I've been tutored on the wars, the sieges, the destruction of the four

nations. But I'll never truly understand how you and Mother came into the picture together at exactly the same time. I'll never see the whole sequence of how the Eight Heroes were formed and martyred. But what I do understand from the stories is that Mother was scared... she was terrified of the unknown; of what could happen. But she was bold enough to do something about it. I think I wanted that for myself, too. You and Mother are heroes, Daddy. Everyone in that kingdom cherishes you, waits patiently after you... I was scared that if I took the throne without something like this happening that the people of Alexandria wouldn't take me seriously. I wanted to learn the sword, I wanted to leave the castle... but I didn't want this pain and suffering to happen. But they go hand in hand, don't they?"

Zidane's eyes searched the horizon, watching the early morning fog swirl at the sprawling base of the Iifa Tree. "I guess it's just family tradition, huh? We all want to have our adventures. But... the people of Alexandria would have accepted you either way, Sarah. You are your mother's daughter."

"Maybe I was wrong at the time when I was pushing you to make this happen," Sarah looked to her father with her exhausted glassy eyes. "I don't regret anything, though, Daddy. I wanted to come. I

needed to. For Bella. And I needed to come for you. And I promise I'll make Alex understand all of this one day, when she's older."

Again, the thought of his youngest bubbly child made him feel awful. "I hope she's okay."

"I'm sure she is. After all, she is most like you," Sarah told him. They were quiet for a few beats before Sarah brought her sword up. It glinted in the early morning light. Zidane found himself looking at the facets of the garnets. "We can't delay anymore, Daddy. I don't know what awaits us in there or what kind of tricks Kuja has up his gaudy sleeves, but it's time."

Zidane nodded. "Long Live the Queen."

The footpath was narrow and rigid. Bella did her best not to cast her eyes off the edge down towards the dizzying array of tangled angry vines. In front of her, she reached for Steiner's hand and he gave it a comforting squeeze. Behind her, Beatrix kept close, placing a hand to the shoulder of the middle child. Zidane lead with Sarah and Dante edging along beside him. Eiko was right on Dante's heels and at the end were Fauna and Freya. As they came closer,

the tree towered further and further over them. Sarah cocked her head back, hearing the leaves coming together. Distantly, birds chirped. It seemed so peaceful, it was hard to believe this was an infamous location in Gaian history. Zidane half-expected Amarant to come leaping from the vines. As he looked along the maze-like entanglements of walk paths leading all around the base of the tree, he believed fleetingly that he saw Dagger darting down them in a frenzy. And not far behind, he could see himself tripping to catch up with her. He wondered if the Mistodon's lurked in the shadows, eagerly awaiting their prey at command. The chaos of memories swirled past him as he saw Eiko leap branch to branch with her small legs. Vivi windmilling his arms to stay upright. It was all there, following him, replaying for him as if there had been a day that passed where he hadn't thought of it. But there hadn't.

Finally, the path widened as the group approached a large knot in the tree, designed to be a concealed entrance. The same one they had used so long ago. Zidane glanced around. Beatrix looked over the edge and wandered towards the way in, touching the tree almost hesitantly. She looked back towards Zidane. "No one's guarding the door. No

one's patrolling the outside. It's somewhat discomfiting how quiet it is. Surely Kuja knows we are here.”

“He does,” Fauna said, tearing her eyes away from the luscious leaves growing overhead. “There was no need to patrol when the seal was activated.”

“But we broke the seal,” Bella turned to Fauna. “Wouldn’t that make him think he needs to become defensive?”

“Unless...” Zidane’s eyes followed the ivy leaves growing up the massive trunk. “He wants us to come inside. He wants us in his space. So then we will have to play his rules.”

“Then let’s drive him out,” Sarah looked to Beatrix. “Make him fight on our terms.”

“The only question is... where is he?” Steiner shook his head.

Zidane cringed in the next moment, touching his head and tilting it down. Immediately, Sarah reached for him to steady him. A harpist such as myself plays by no rules other than the one’s of the strings... Zidane lifted his head, blinking rapidly, as the rush of blood receded from his temples. “He’s at

the center. At the harp,” He looked to Eiko, whose eyes lit up in recognition.

“The harp?” Beatrix echoed, rather incredulously.
“Zidane, this is a tree.”

“Trust me,” Zidane told her. “I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Kuja is down there, Beatrix.”

Zidane pressed forward and the party wasted no time following after him. Some of the taller men, like Dante and Steiner, had to tilt their heads as they headed through the entrance of the trunk. What confronted the group was even more staggering in appearance than the tree itself. Zidane and Eiko were more startled by the idea of returning. But the rest of the group was in awe as they looked at the tree, not quite believing what they were seeing. The tree seemed so modern, as dark and well-conformed as a castle. Green lights resounded from the rigid, hollowed out space of the walls, invisible and to the naked eye. The paths were smooth with triangular symbols leading towards a large stone platform. Sarah’s mouth was agape as she walked forward.

“Who built such a thing?” Steiner wondered aloud as they group came to surround the circular stone platform.

“Madain Sari is the pulse of the planet,” Eiko’s voice was quiet, as if she was scared to disturb something. “This is the heart in which the pulse resounds from.”

“How do we go down?” Beatrix asked, turning in a circle. “There are no stairs.”

“We use this platform,” Zidane said, gesturing in front of his scuffed boots. “It will take us down.”

“Wait,” Freya came forward, dropping her bag from her shoulder. ‘I’ve read many ancient texts about the Iifa Tree. Everyone needs to eat some of this paste I made in Madain Sari.’ She lifted a stone bowl wrapped in linen from her bag. She presented a small silver teaspoon, as well. “The creatures that lurk here can inflict a deadly zombification disease on you. Eat this paste if you value your mind and skin.” Freya went first, showing everyone it didn’t take much. Bella scrunched her nose up. It tasted so putrid. In that moment, she would have gladly eaten Quina’s blood pudding instead. Everyone had a similar reaction and Steiner even gagged before he was able to force it down his throat.

“Okay...” Zidane let out a sigh, drooping his shoulders for a moment. “This is it. Once we go

down, there's no turning back until we've finished what we came here for."

"I can't wait to drive my sword right through his throat," Sarah muttered. Zidane glanced to her fleetingly.

"Let's go. Everyone step on the platform. It'll be a tight fit, but we'll manage." Together, everyone squeezed on. Zidane wrapped his arms around Bella, who was standing in front of him. There was only a moments delay before the platform lit up and slowly began to lower them. Beatrix looked to Steiner and then cocked her head up, watching as they descended further and further below. Bella gripped her father's hands, her heart hammering in her chest. It grew dark in the narrow passageway. There was only the light of the platform below them. Sarah pressed herself to Dante, also feeling a wave of fright come over her. She didn't know what to expect below. As she looked to the dimly lit faces of their party, Sarah began to wonder if everyone was going to return as one to Alexandria. She felt a pressure growing in her temples, but she ignored it, almost desperately.

Finally, they emerged from the narrow tube and the platform settled in at the top of a spiraling walk

path that following the curve of the tree. Zidane pursed his lips, seeing a memory of him, Vivi, Dagger, and Eiko pressed to the wall, carefully maneuvering themselves down towards their own unknown. The green lights pulsated against the walls again and all was silent. Dante stepped off the platform, his boots crunching against the brittle footpath. He scuffed his feet back and forth.

“It feels damp...” He turned to the party. “There may be soft spots in the path. Be careful.”

“I’ll lead,” Zidane brushed past everyone, holding Bella’s hand tightly. “Stick close to the walls. The structure will be strongest there.”

Together, the party lined up with their shoulder blades touching the rigid interior of the trunk and carefully, they inched closer and closer to their destiny.

The spiraling leaf of the Iifa Tree had not changed. When it first took off, Eiko and Zidane braced themselves, but ended up falling over trying to catch both Sarah and Bella who were launched off their feet. All apart of Kuja’s quirky humor, Zidane could only think. The Iifa Tree had died like so

many other things nearly twenty years ago, but Kuja chose not to change a thing as he raised it back to its original stature. It turned sharply down the long jagged stem of the Iifa's core. Freya stood steady, holding onto her hat and watching the rapidly approaching bottom. The walls were no longer dark, but alive in a swirling green pattern. Zidane helped Sarah and Bella back to their feet.

“Oh, this is making me woozy...” Bella shook her head.

“Stand in the center,” Zidane said, directing her by guiding her hand.

“The walls... they’re alive!” Freya exclaimed, shaking her head. “What is this?”

“It’s the soul of the tree,” Fauna was still, unaffected by the sharp spirals. “It’s alive, just as the organs in your body are.”

“Watch out!” Dante called, immediately ducking and rolling. A man skidded onto the leaf from above, coming just beside Bella. He was wearing the same uniform as Fauna. Zidane immediately grabbed Bella, picking her up and back pedaling, as Beatrix, Steiner, and Sarah drew their swords. The man swung his arms around, his hands alight with a

purple flame. “Looks like Kuja knows we’re close.” Dante said, also brandishing his sword. Hurriedly, Zidane pushed Bella behind him, drawing his daggers from his belt.

“Fauna, can’t you do something?!” Zidane called, watching as the man looked around aggressive, sizing up those who surrounded him. “How can we make him deviate?! What’s the trick?!”

“I don’t know,” Fauna shook her head, standing away from the man. “I don’t even know what happened to me.”

“Who cares,” Sarah tightened her grip on her sword. “We have to stop him before—”

The man swung and the purple light engulfing his hand took the form of a hammer. Sarah dove out of the way as it met the leaf, causing a great unbalance. Bella windmilled her arms, nearly going over, but Zidane grabbed her by the coat, pulling her away from the edge. Dante swung from behind, catching the man in his calf. He let out a yell and turned, uppercutting Dante, who went backwards. Sarah came up quickly from where she was knelt down, but the servant was lightning fast, catching her arm. He landed a series of punches against her ribcage. Zidane charged forward, using his shoulder to ram

the man down. Sarah staggered backwards, holding her sword up. Quickly, she rounded to stand in front of Bella, who remained knelt on the ground, watching in great astonishment.

“You fiend!” Steiner brought his sword down but the man swung his legs, disarming Steiner and nailing Zidane directly in the chest. The king rolled across the leaf, nearly sent off the edge, but he managed to stop his sliding, holding his daggers tightly. He ground his teeth together as he regained his breath and lifted his head. Freya leapt into the air and Beatrix covered for Steiner as he retrieved his sword. The man rolled back to his feet, brandishing a silver sword now, which he swung widely. Beatrix’s steel met his and she pushed against him before darting right and cutting him along the shoulder. From above, Freya’s lancer came down, grazing the man at his spine. He let out an angry shout, again swinging his sword. Beatrix met him once more, but this time, he stepped forward immediately, causing her to second guess her footing and back pedal. He brought his sword up, but Steiner’s came from the side, piercing the man straight through his ribcage. Stunned, the man dropped his sword and it clattered to the earthy platform beneath them.

His hands erupted into purple flames again and he blasted it towards Steiner. A jolt of electricity ricocheted through the captain and blindly, he withdrew his sword and staggered away. Blood now spurted from his wound and the man collapsed to a knee, holding his midriff tightly. Zidane came forward, drawing his dagger outward. The cool steel met his chin and Zidane forced him to look up. The man's face had paled but still in his weakened state, his eyes were cold and hard. He almost seemed somewhat... amused? "Where is Kuja?" Zidane demanded as the platform continued to surge forward. "It's over. Now is the time to abandon ship while you can, if you value your life."

"Long live Terra," The man sputtered.

"You fool!" Steiner bellowed from where he recovered from the shocks. Beatrix knelt beside him, helping prop him up. "You worship false idols."

"Kuja doesn't care if you live or die," Zidane said, not even flinching. "Is that the kind of person you want to follow?"

"The planet will be whole again," The man continued.

“Last chance,” Zidane warned, his face becoming stony. “Garland failed, Kuja has failed once before... what makes you think this time is any different?”

The man lowered his head for a moment, gazing past Zidane. Zidane looked over his shoulder, spying Bella sitting on the ground in her dark and faded travel clothes. Bella’s dark eyes were wide as she looked towards the severely bleeding man. “Princess Arabella...” The man wheezed. “The Goddess... of Mass Destruction... What an honor to lay eyes on you...”

“Shut up!” Sarah raised her voice and her sword. Her eyes were hot with anger. “She is not your Goddess of Mass Destruction!”

“Arabella alone is what makes things different...”

Sarah came forward and everyone around her reacted in a shocked silence as she knelt, grabbing the man by his chin and directing his slowly fading eyes towards her. Zidane lowered his dagger, watching his daughter intently. “You have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. Tell us where Kuja is. Let’s be done with this.”

The man inspected Sarah's face before he grinned, bearing teeth that had been stained red. Blood dribbled from his cracked lips but Sarah didn't even flinch. "Oh, and the heir. How polite of you to come and aid Kuja's cause." In the next beat, Sarah dipped her head, her face contorting in pain. She shook herself away from him, gripping the hilt of her sword tightly. She stared ahead at the path of the swirling leaf, wishing it would stop. Sarah looked to Beatrix. Despite their momentum, everything around them was still.

"Finish him," Sarah said with no rhythm to her voice.

"Sarah!" Zidane turned to her with eyes as wide as saucers.

"I said finish him!" Sarah's movement was rigid and her teeth were clenched. A sweat was breaking across her brow and her eyes looked wet.

Zidane didn't have time to react as the leaf lurched to a stop at the base. Around them, the Iifa Tree glowed in neon greens and swirled almost menacingly. It was enough to make one's head throb. The entire party staggered, some falling to their knees. Bella spilled off the edge, sprawling across the rigid and earthy feeling of the platform

just beyond their mode of transportation. Bella's breathing had shallowed, a fear overtaking her. When she lifted her head, she noticed the goonish man was gone. As if he had vanished into thin air. Sarah pressed a hand to her temple, doing her best to remain cool. A frightful headache was overcoming her. It nearly made her see double.

Cautiously, Zidane stepped off the leaf and reached for Bella, helping her up. "Are you alright?" He asked. She nodded, but her dark eyes were distracted by what they now saw. It seemed so quiet in the vast space, but a deep humming could almost be heard. The only words to describe it were that something seemed to be alive. There was but a lone staircase, leading down to an even wider and longer platform with the same dark, twisted, and crumbling tree vines. And beyond that, a bright green light emanated. Cautiously, the group descended the stairs, turning in circles and investigating their new surroundings. Eiko and Zidane were quiet, sticking close to each other.

"There's no where further to go," Beatrix said, coming to the edge. She gazed down, her eyes somewhat bewildered. Freya came to stand beside her.

“Is this the tree’s core?” Freya asked, kneeling to gawk even further. “It looks like... a harp... just like you were saying, Zidane.”

“It’s beautiful,” Steiner’s eyes were wide.

“I’ve never gone any deeper than this,” Zidane shook his head, following closely on the heels of Bella who was drawing near to a moving wall. The young girl was quite mesmerized. It felt almost like something or someone was... whispering at her? She felt as if in that moment, she was understanding the tree and its history. Fleeting visions of the past flowed through her. Flashes of orange, shaking, screaming voices that she couldn’t quite decipher. What had happened here? What was it about the core of the tree that brought out an anxious feeling from her? An energy was flowing into her, calling towards her, but she didn’t understand what it meant. What was it trying to make her notice?

“Then we’re at a dead end...?” Dante cocked his head back, looking towards the long and spiraling way they had come from.

“It can’t be,” Sarah kept her sword at her side, her boots crunching against the dried platform. “There were no other ways to go.”

“We must have missed something,” Steiner tore his eyes away from the spectacle below them. “There must be another way.”

“Sarah’s right,” Eiko shook her head. “This is the only way. No one has ever been beyond this point. Not even the Summoner tribe.”

“Dammit,” Sarah hissed, coming towards the edge to gaze down into the blinding green lights. “This must be a trick. Don’t tell me we wasted all day, worked up all this courage, just to get lead to a dead end?” Bella pursed her lips. As she looked over her sister, she again felt the energetic whispers coming towards her. Something about her sister was suddenly so different in that moment. Bella tore away from her mother and crossed to her older sister, grabbing her hand. A terrible feeling was unfurling in the pit of her stomach. She hated all of this.

“Get away from the edge!” Bella said, yanking her arm.

“Bella!?” Sarah glared at her now. “What are you do—”

A terrible shake overcame the platform and Zidane felt his wildest fears coming forth again,

ripping through the fiber of his being. Even Eiko's eyes lit up with a terrible anxiety. As everybody staggered about, Zidane noticed Fauna had not descended from the platform above. She stared with an empty look, as if she was confronting everything she wished to so dearly avoid. A green flash overcame the room. Bella and Sarah were sent backwards off their feet as something darted straight past them. Bella could feel her brain riveting against her skull, over and over, and she clung to her sister whose teeth were ground together. When all the shuddering subsided, several of the party members had to steady themselves. Other's lifted their heads from where they had fallen. Zidane was crouched to the ground only feet away from his daughter's. But he was absolutely numb.

Floating above them, with the spectacle of glowing, breathing green as a background, was Kuja. After so many months of teasing, of utter mental anguish, he had appeared before them all in the flesh; the living embodiment of the fear that tormented them. His hair was still long and ashen white, falling around his thin neck and broad shoulders. He wore his familiar purple cloak everyone had come to known him in, with its high collar and gold embroideries following the hems. It

covered his entire body, swallowing up and hiding what he was ashamed of; his immortal being. But he smiled, even with his dark swollen purple eyes. Zidane's hands gripped the dry platform beneath him. He was beginning to shake in his entire body.

“Brother...” Kuja’s airy velvety voice echoed through the core of the tree, resounding into the darkest parts of Zidane. ‘We finally meet again. It’s been far too long.’ Coolly, he turned his eyes on the princess, who still laid on the floor, their legs entangled, their eyes wide with an unknown fear. “It’s a family reunion. How desperately I’ve been waiting for this exact moment. Look at you two... frightened little does... you look just like your own parents when they were your age.”

“Shut up!” Zidane stood, swinging his arms out at his side. “We aren’t here to bullshit, Kuja. You know why we’re actually here.”

“Oh, yes,” Kuja crossed his arms over his chest, rather bored. “You always were the serious brother.”

“Stop calling me that,” Zidane sneered. “We aren’t brothers.”

“Your genetic make-up would beg to differ,” Kuja smiled. ‘No mind. I didn’t wait all this time

just to have an argument with you. Yes, I know why you're all here. You don't like what I've been doing. But to that, dear little brother, I can only say... too bad. I know what you think of me. I know what you've said of me. You think I'm only a failure, chasing in the footsteps of an entire lineage of failure. The same could be said of you.' Kuja brought himself slightly lower, looking over the party members who were now bracing themselves, mentally and physically, for the worst. "But there are many things I have learned," Kuja laughed, his shoulders bobbing up and down. "If only I knew then what I know now. Garland could only dream to accomplish and discover the things I know now." Kuja brought his arms out and the bell sleeves of his cloak rumpled back, revealing arms full of scars and burns, wrinkled skin that betrayed the rather immaculate look of his face. "Garland was much too premature. He should have been thanking me for what I did; casting you down to this forsaken planet. If he had been patient, hadn't pushed my buttons, hadn't lead me into a frenzy, he could have had the ultimate weapon he desired." Kuja turned his head coyly. "Princess Arabella Alexandros-Tribal. The most perfect genetic make-up. The last of the Summoners, an Angel of Death in and of herself.

Yes, Arabella, you are the perfect storm of two people come together.”

Zidane unsheathed his daggers now. “We don’t have the time or the patience to listen to your little plan, Kuja. That’s why Hilda stayed home.”

Kuja only smiled. “You haven’t changed, Zidane. Still just a brute who has no desire to learn or understand.”

Zidane bit down on his lip so hard, he tasted copper. “I think I’ll sleep better not knowing what you think of my daughter’s.”

“I think your daughter’s are wonderful,” Kuja told him. “My sweet little angels of misery...”

“Enough!” Zidane roared. “Let’s get this over with. Come down and face it, Kuja. You might know my weak spots, but I know yours, too.” Zidane came forward, grabbing both Bella and Sarah and pulling them back behind him. Together, Freya, Beatrix, Steiner, and Dante came shoulder to shoulder, their faces stone hard despite the rapid beatings of their hearts. Kuja couldn’t help but laugh. Behind the rag-tag team, Bella and Sarah stood beside each other. Bella was absolutely petrified with fear, but in that moment, the whispers returned. Her dark eyes darted

about before finally they came to rest on the large pendant dangling from Sarah's neck. It was... talking to her?

"Let me show you the miraculous things I have discovered," Kuja grinned. 'Allow me to show you what I am actually capable of!' Kuja lifted his hand. For a moment, it was silent. Zidane looked to Beatrix, then Dante, who all waited anxiously, expectantly, for something to happen. Was he only psyching them out? One more wishful trick to bring all their guards down? But suddenly, from behind, Sarah let out a cry and she staggered back, bringing a hand to her head. A horrible throbbing came over her. She was certain the burning sensation behind her eyes was going to knock her out. Her hand loosened around the hilt of her sword as the blood pulsated through her body, rushing up her spine and through her cheeks. And in the next moment, her hands tightened around her sword, her eyes glowing with a hot anger. The party stared at her, unsure of what they were watching. Sarah brought her sword up in front of her, glaring to each familiar face. "You see, Zidane, your little chip was just an experiment. I wanted to see through your eyes... see what I could do. But Sarah... well, she has the most perfected chip of them all. Even better than the one's I put in

my goons, that I now see are defective.” He glared towards Fauna, who still only stood in an aloof manner above. “Arabella may be strong in means the world cannot see but Sarah is the strongest of all you in pure force. This chip was originally meant for her dear little sister. But I thought it would make better use in Sarah’s neck. Sarah, be a good girl and do what you’re supposed to.”

Only a beat passed before Sarah swung for Zidane. The king gasped sharply, bringing his dagger up to meet her steel. She pushed forcefully against him, her face contorted in anger and pain. Her skin was grimy and flushed. She was strong and Zidane could hear their steel grinding against each other. He ducked and rolled. Sarah staggered and let out another cry before swinging her sword. She caught Dante in the arm and his blood splattered across her neck and dirty tunic. She wasted no time bringing her sword up again. Dante back pedaled, leaning out of each of her forceful swings. “Sarah!” He yelled, ducking as she swung again. ‘Sarah, stop! It’s me, Dante!’ Her face didn’t even twitch. She reared her elbow back and brought her sword forward. Dante met her this time, sparks spreading between them. “Sarah, please!”

“You bastard!” Zidane turned to Kuja. “Get down here and do your own dirty laundry!”

“You may know my weak spots, but I know your ultimate ones,” Kuja grinned, still hovering in his blissful state. “What will you do, Zidane? Will you hurt, perhaps even kill, your little girl to stop me?”

Beatrix watched in horror as Dante and Sarah danced about them, swinging their swords and deftly weaving their feet between each other. Sarah was quite gifted with her sword, a terrible realization in the moment. Again, Sarah slashed Dante across the wrist and he let out an agonizing yelp. But still, he only continued to dodge and deflect the princess who stopped at nothing, her eyes flaring with a desire to drive the sword straight through his chest. “Zidane, we have to restrain her,” Beatrix grabbed his arm. “Steiner, Freya, keep your eyes on Kuja. Come on, we have to get in there.”

“Daddy!” Bella was breathless as she sprung forward, grabbing hold of his belt. Her inky locks stuck to her sweaty face. “We have to get the pendant from Sarah’s neck!”

“We can’t worry about what happens to it right now,” Zidane shook his head, ready to spring into

action. “I know it’s invaluable to our family but there are bigger things, Bella. Just stand back!”

“No!” Bella cried. “It’s talking to me, Daddy! I... I think it wants me to use it!”

“But...” Zidane looked to Eiko, who was floored by what was unraveling around her. “The pendant itself isn’t a summon... right, Eiko?”

Dante was trembling in pain as he pushed against Sarah, not wanting to hurt her. Crimson blood dripped from his arms and he reared his shoulder into her, staggering her for a moment. Gracefully, however, she pivoted and swung for him again. Dante tripped falling backwards, his sword skidding just from his grasp. With wide dark eyes, he looked at the angry princess, who was practically frothing at the mouth with a blood lust.

“No time to ask questions!” Beatrix shoved through, grabbing one of Sarah’s arms from behind. The princess let out a yell. Zidane didn’t even have time to think as he lunged forward, grabbing and bending her other arm backwards. Her sword swung dangerously close to his thighs as they attempted to contain the writhing princess, who screamed in sharp angry notes.

Bella watched her sister in true horror, but again, her eyes fell to the Raven Claw pendant beating against her blood splattered chest. “Eiko, it’s really talking to me. Some thing’s in there!”

Bella bounded forward as Eiko called after her in a rasp. She reached forward to grab the pendant in hopes of breaking the chain from around Sarah’s neck. But in the next moment, Sarah managed to elbow Zidane and Beatrix sharply in the ribcage. The king and general doubled over and staggered back. It was all slow motion for Bella as she withdrew her hand, watching with eyes the size of saucers. Sarah didn’t hesitate as again she reared her sword back, driving it straight through Bella’s right shoulder. The younger princess gasped sharply as she felt the cool steel break through the other side of her shoulder. Sarah breathed heavily, twisting the sword into her little sister’s chest, blood oozing through the fabric and dribbling into a pool all over her boots. Bella had paled, staring directly into Sarah’s eyes and seeing absolutely nothing left of her.

“BELLA!” Zidane’s scream echoed through the entirety of the Iifa Tree.

31. The Iifa Tree, Pt 2

Chapter Thirty-One

It was absolutely still and silent in the Iifa Tree. The entire party looked onto the scene in the center of the platform in utter disbelief, shaking and trembling. Eiko's hands covered her mouth, hot tears streaking down her flushed cheeks. Steiner's mouth had fallen open. Beatrix was absolutely tense. Dante watched in bewilderment from where he bled on the ground. And Freya gripped her lancer at her side, a wave of failure overcoming her. Zidane fell to his knees, his eyes wide, his skin as white as a ghost. Bella twitched on the end of her sister's sword, feeling the rigid facets of the garnet in her chest. She squirmed, pressing her lips together. She had never felt such a horrid pain before. Her entire body was filled with a burning sensation. She let out short gasps as she grappled with the aches. Kuja crossed his arms over his chest, pressing a slender finger to his chin. He still couldn't help but grin.

“What a magnificent success,” Kuja declared. “Sarah is performing much better than I expected. It’s a shame she didn’t inherit her mother’s gift.”

“How could this be a success?!” Steiner turned to Kuja, his armor clanking as he struggled to control himself. “If Arabella was your primary goal, how could this possibly be good!?”

Kuja shook his head at the captain. “The wound isn’t mortal.”

Zidane couldn’t breath. He watched as Bella’s blood pooled between the dried vines of the platform. The crimson red ran towards him, soaking into his knees. His own daughter’s blood was like a river gushing towards him. He was absolutely petrified. He couldn’t believe what his eyes were seeing. Kuja’s words only echoed through his mind as he watched what he believed to be the end of his own life. It was as if that sword had pierced his own heart. Bella coughed, blood sputtering from her lips and covering her chin. Weakly, she raised her head to look at Sarah, who had paused, keeping the sword drawn through her.

“S... Sarah...” Bella’s voice was so raspy. With shaky hands, she came to grip the steel. It cut through her palm like no more than parchment. She felt more warm blood ooze through her skin and with great effort, she brought her other hand up to inflict the same wound. The blood dribbled from her

and Bella found herself becoming faint-headed. How much blood could she lose, how much pain could she actually endure? The electricity running through her body was unlike anything she had ever felt before. ‘Sarah... it’s me...’ Bella’s voice was scratchy and she looked to her sister earnestly. Sarah’s eyes waxed and waned between anger and relentless feelings, but still, she held the sword steady through Bella’s chest. The younger princess’ body was beginning to shake and she felt herself somewhat fading. But with her bloodied palm, she reached for the pendant secured around Sarah’s neck.” Sarah... you don’t mean to do this...” Bella paused to take a breath as the pain wracked her body.” I know you don’t,’ Tears now filled her dark eyes, falling down her paled cheeks. “You can’t control yourself... I know...” She lowered her arm back against the cool steel of the sword, trying to catch her breath. It was nerve wracking watching her blood rush down the polished metal, running over Sarah’s wrist, who still did not flinch as she held the sword confidently. Tears formed in Bella’s eyes as again, with a shaky hand, she began reaching towards Sarah. “I know you’re in there, Sarah... I know you recognize me. I know you didn’t want to do this to me.” Her hand grew near to the pendant and Sarah jolted the sword inside her chest. Bella let

out an agonizing yelp. A pulse of pain ran through the length of her body.

Zidane staggered to his feet, his pants and hands dried in the crusty blood of Bella. He came towards the girls but a force threw everyone away. Zidane slammed into the base of the staircase, his body paralyzed against it. Beatrix craned her neck in an attempt to move her body. Kuja grinned from where he was, his hands lifted upwards. Finally, he lowered himself to the platform, near the princesses, as everyone looked on in useless pain, unable to do a thing. “Don’t be rude, Zidane,” Kuja said, his boots clacking against the vines. He took a moment to admire the shiny blood of Bella’s that was beginning to flood across all of the platform. “This is a beautiful thing, don’t you think? The true essence of sister’s bonding.”

Zidane squirmed beside Eiko, who was silently crying as she watched the scene unfold. Zidane felt so utterly powerless as he looked on. It was miraculous Bella was even still conscious as she dangled off of Sarah’s sharp sword. Everyone in the room could only imagine the pain she was in. Kuja grinned as he saw Zidane’s eyes growing wet. He pursed his lips tightly together as the tears finally started coming down his cheeks. His head was

beginning to hurt like it never had. Everything was crashing in on him; his entire life, it felt like. Shifting before his eyes, he could see all of it replaying again and it was unbelievable in that moment he had lived the life he had. He could see Dagger again, her porcelain face in pure tranquility as she titled her head against her silky pillow, laughing about something he had said. He could see her large and protruding belly from her thin frame, her slender fingers caressing the bump, wandering who in the world her baby might be. He saw the birthday parties where, together, they had carried the cake in towards their awaiting little princesses. The nights of stomachaches, heartaches, flashed by, as he laid beside his small daughter's, holding them against him, trying to console what he couldn't fix. He saw their first steps, he heard their first words; it was all so magnificent and utterly heartbreaking. And now, he was watching what felt like the loss of his two daughter's.

“I know I’m leaving the girl’s in good hands...”
Dagger whispered, her pale face tilted towards Zidane. He was collapsed at the side of the bed, holding her hand. The short and raspy breaths she took pained him to his core. “I know you’ll give them enough love, as if I was never gone...”

“Don’t say that,” Zidane pressed her hand to his wet cheek. “Please, don’t say goodbye, Dagger. It can’t be the end. It only feels like the beginning...”

“It’s not goodbye,” Dagger tightened her grip around his hand. It was so familiar. She reached for it in the happiest of times and the darkest. “It’s not the end. I’ll never be far away, Zidane. Just close your eyes and dream... and I’ll be there.”

Bella ground her teeth together. Her head was whirling and pounding. She thought at any moment, her body would give into the wrenching feeling that captured her. Sarah was unrelenting in her desire to watch her dangle from her steel. She tilted the sword inside of her and Bella cried out as she felt it grind against her. She was becoming dizzy, but through it all, the pendant still spoke to her. It still gave her a will and a desire to stop all this sickening madness and unnecessary suffering. She would have given anything in that moment to have her old life back. The one she thought was boring and suffocating. The one where she was needlessly jealous of Sarah’s long legs and rolling blond curls. She missed her books, she missed her bed. She missed her annoying little sister always tugging her sleeves, asking her to play cards. She wanted it all back; the family dinners, the jokes she shared with Steiner on patrol,

the rainy days spent in the library. Bella inhaled sharply and with all her might brought her hand forward. Her bloody palm gripped the beautiful jewel, drenching it in all her pain. She cried out as she snagged it from Sarah's neck, the chain breaking soundlessly.

A bright light suddenly emanated between the sister's and they were ripped apart. Sarah tumbled across the floor, rolling through Bella's blood. Her sword slid right towards Zidane's feet, who was still powerless to do anything. Bella crumpled to the ground, blood spurting from her wound. But a force tilted her upwards and the pendant hovered before her shaky body. The pain of the sword leaving her body was like no other, but Bella's wide, wet eyes only focused on the words spouting from the pendant.

Voice from the past...

Joining yours and mine...

“What is this!?” Kuja stepped forward, absolutely bewildered. Bella closed her eyes, tilting her head back and allowing the calming energy to overtake her.

“Eiko...!?” Zidane squirmed. “What’s happening!?”

“A summon?” Eiko furrowed her brow. “But the Raven Claw isn’t able to...?”

Angel wings began to glow from Bella’s back and she rose to her feet despite her devastating wounds. In that moment, all the pain evaporated. She felt a surge of power through her. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. It was warm, filling her with a feeling that was so distinctive yet so unfamiliar. It almost reminded her of the times her father would wrap his arms around her, kiss her forehead, and hold her hand. But something felt different... it was unfamiliar to the way her father’s hand curled around her shoulders. She felt her entire being caving in to this summon; something completely foreign to her. Never had she been so comforted or confident. Never had she heard the voice of the summon so clearly. It seemed like the gentle voice was... singing to her.

So far and beyond...

See the birds as they glide by...

“An unknown Eidolon!?” Kuja shook his head, nearly flabbergasted. “Impossible!”

Bella brought her crusty and cut hands forward as the pendant came to meet her tender skin again. Across the platform, Sarah found herself sitting up, staring with wide eyes. She emerged from her foggy mind as if she had resurfaced through chilling and sharp water. Bella was covered in so much blood and even more still ran down the length of her dingy and worn travel clothes. Sarah's breathing shallowed as she registered everything around her. A panic nearly washed over her as she tugged at her shirt, realizing blood was all over her. She gawked at her younger sister, only watching what was unfolding. The beauty of the glowing wings emanating from her back took away from the sore and sorry state she was in. A voice was whispering through her ears as the light in the palms of her hand began to grow brighter. Kuja looked on with a bewildered face, not understanding what he was watching. Everyone in the room was unmoving, pinned to walls, collapsed across the floor, or watching in a stunned silence from above. The young girl only grew brighter with each passing beat.

Kuja turned towards Eiko. "What is she summoning!? You have a horn, what do you hear!?"

Eiko's face had grown solemn, her eyes sopping wet, as she watched a gold hoop began to form

around Bella's waist, a nearly white illumination that was soft and only growing more powerful as Bella engulfed herself in the uplifting prayers. She glared at Kuja with her stinging red eyes. "You're a fool, Kuja," Eiko said, spitting at him. Kuja waved his arms furiously and surged forward, gripping Eiko by her throat and banging her against the wall. Zidane squirmed to no use, grounding his teeth together.

"I cannot stop her now, but there's nothing stopping me from killing you right this moment," Kuja explained to her, relatively calm.

"You could kill me... but it'd make you an even bigger fool the third time around."

Kuja banged her head into the wall again and Eiko let out a sharp gasp. "I'll ask you again: what is she summoning?"

"You've changed, Kuja," Eiko said with hard eyes. 'You used to be a powerful mage yourself and you relished in the thoughts of relying on those powers to get what you pleased. But now... you're just like Garland. A mad scientist holed up in his little lab, playing with biological matter, sourcing it with magic, to create yourself the ultimate subject, the most excellent pupil. The one to do all of your dirty work for you. That's why you created that

plague, isn't it? Don't you remember? You killed a third of the working class in Lindblum. You killed nearly a quarter of the Alexandrian elementary population. You killed Queen Garnet.' Zidane watched the princess intently. "You're just like Garland and you don't want to admit it! He'd do the same thing to his little population of dolls on Terra if he realized they were all defunct. I don't fear you. I only fear what you seek."

"Why...?" Zidane couldn't help but croak. "Why did you send that plague? Was is systematic?"

"Of course it was!" Eiko shouted. "He killed the people who made technological advances in Lindblum, to slow us down! He killed the children in your kingdom for population control, he only wants adults! And—"

"And I killed Queen Garnet because I knew it would break you," Kuja turned his eyes calmly on Zidane, his heart thudding in his chest. "The weaker you are, Zidane, the stronger I am."

"That's why your orphaned Fauna as a young girl," Zidane shook his head. "No wonder I never got sick being in the same room as her... You planned all of it."

“But the question is... why a ten year gap?” Dante said from beside Eiko. “Why did you wait so long? You’re back at square one.”

The sound of shifting metal got everyone’s attention. Just behind Kuja, Sarah stood. The entire frame of her body was shaking as she held the tip of her sword to Kuja’s back. “Because when Kuja did that... he wasn’t ready to face the world yet.” Her hand reached forward, snagging Kuja’s cloak backwards. It was quite an awful sight. He had bits of scrap metal welded into his chest and sides of his ribs. Plastered in nasty bulging and flesh scars that ran lengths across him. His legs were painted in bruises, only held straight by the tall boots he wore. “You aren’t strong, Kuja... you’re weaker than my father. You have had far less to gain out of any of this. I hate you. And this isn’t your little biological hack playing a trick on me. I really hate you, Kuja. And I do want you to die.” In the next moment, she surged the sword forward, using all her might with both hands gripping the hilt. She drove the sword directly through his chest. Kuja’s eyes grew wide and he fell against the steel, gripping the protruding end with his shaking hand.

“Directly through... my mortal part...” Kuja whispered as blood began to drip from his lips. “My

heart... how symbolic, Princess Sarah..."

"The summon...!" Eiko gasped, watching as now, the light completely engulfed Bella. Her wings drew out, showing the true magnificence of their statement. A beam of light pooled behind Bella now before it shot upwards, illuminating the entirety of the Iifa Tree trunk. The room became nearly sterile white and suddenly, everyone collapsed from the walls. Sarah drew her sword from Kuja's chest and he collapsed to the ground, barely able to support his head as he watched the scene unfurling before him. Sarah reached for her father's hand as something began to fabricate in the light, just beyond Bella's shoulders. The bloody princess stood firm, her eyes closed as she focused on the warm serenity coming around her. Sarah gasped sharply, dropping her sword and covering her hand over her mouth. Zidane's grip only tightened on Sarah's hand as he watched with wide blue eyes, not believing what he was seeing. Eiko was crying, Beatrix and Steiner were stunned. Freya bowed her head and Dante was absolutely mesmerized.

It was Queen Garnet. Wrapped in flowing white satin silks with refreshing green ivy's stitched along the hems, she was a force to behold. The very same tiara Sarah had worn on her sixteenth birthday was

perched in her long black hair was smooth, full, and a bold statement. Her face was so gentle, her skin so smooth. In her hand, a gold and garnet encrusted rod was sported and she brought it to her chest. Her chocolate eyes closed and the light in the room intensified.

It was my devotion to keep Gaia safe. I swore it upon the throne I took before my people, only sixteen years old, naive, and frightened of the world's way. But one thing became clear to me amongst all the doom, the dread, and the destruction. I needed true friends during that time. And I had found them. They were people who would walk to the edges of the world for me... and leap from balconies for me... The force that threatens our sanctity of safety cannot win when birds of a feather flock together. The Iifa Tree must be no more. It is but a link to the torment that has always threatened our peace on Gaia. It must be brought down. Just as Kuja has been...

A blinding light engulfed the platform and everyone cringed away. A heat came over Zidane's body and the next thing he knew, he found himself on his knees, splaying across rigid rocks. Sarah tumbled into him and he wrapped his arms around her. Zidane glanced around, breathing heavily. In the distance, beyond the dizzying maze of vines, the Iifa

Tree was beginning to tilt. The beam of light still emanated straight on beyond it, towards the heavens. The sounds of monstrous creaking and snapping of wood echoed out across the spacious rolling hills. Zidane sat up, looking all around.

“Where’s Bella?!” Zidane felt a panic come over him and he stood up. “Where is she?!”

“She’s safe,” Eiko tore her eyes away as the dust began to rise with the collapsing structure of the massive tree. “We must wait for Bella to complete the summon.”

The group stood silently, shoulder to shoulder, watching as the Iifa tree began to cave in on itself. The sounds of breaking branches as it faltered to the ground was loud and riveting. “How could that be?” Sarah asked, watching as the birds began to scatter, circling around the angelic light pooling over the mass destruction. “Mother was inside the pendant... this whole time?”

Eiko sighed, lowering her eyes for a moment. She glanced to Zidane, pursing her lips. “I cannot explain everything... We will never know everything about the summoning world. Eiodolon’s are mystical, powerful, and beautiful spirits. They are capable of working in many mysterious ways. It

seems your mother thought her job wasn't over upon taking her final breath... it seems her love and desire to watch over all of you was so great, she transcended upon to a higher heaven... a tangible way to make you understand your mother still loves you and that she's still here for you."

Behind them, they heard sharp coughing and quickly, Zidane scampered down the uneven incline to kneel beside Fauna. She held her woozy head she sat up. Zidane put an arm around her to steady her. She blinked eyes rapidly as she adjusted to the harsh overhead daylight. When she looked Zidane, seemed downright confused, leaning away from him. "King... King Zidane? What are you doing here?" She paused for a moment, looking around. "And where's here?! What's going on?!"

Zidane was stunned for a moment. "Fauna, do you not remember anything?"

"Fauna?" She furrowed her brow. "My name's Alura, Your Majesty. Please, what is going on?"

Zidane was somewhat relieved she had no idea what has happening. She didn't seem to remember anything. Zidane smiled weakly for a moment, gazing out over the other rocks. That's when the party began to notice dozens of other recruits spread

out amongst the jagged landscape. They were all coming to, rubbing their heads and gawking at their bodysuits. Zidane looked back to Alura, patting her arm gently. “I promise I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.” He stood, turning to his group. Behind them, there was a large plume of dust rising from the mar on Gaia’s surface. “Come on, let’s find everyone.” Zidane watched the remnants of the Iifa Tree for a moment more, pursing his lips.

They all spread out amongst the rocks. Many of the dazed people still made it a point to bow to Zidane, which he quickly asked them to stop doing. Beatrix began taking records of everyone’s names as they all asked the same questions: Where are we? What’s going on? Why am I dressed like this? Most people’s last memories were of their old lives. Some were shoemakers, bartenders, florists, seamstresses, tailors, theater technicians... and they all simply thought they had fainted on the job. When asked what year it was, many people were one or two off. The most extreme cases were Fauna’s. She had no idea a decade had passed. The people looked out towards the huddled mass of the Iifa Tree. They had no idea what they were seeing. Water was passed out as they had the people sit and recollect themselves. Steiner and Dante scanned the area for any people

they may have missed. Zidane walked along the perimeter of the cliff, gazing down at the dead and shriveling vines. He leapt onto a rock, feeling so small compared to environment around him. He realized in that moment, he felt so numb to everything. Zidane was still in utter shock. Everything that had just happened still hadn't registered inside him. Did he really see her? And hear her voice? Not a thing had changed about her. He only wished he could have touched her again.

Zidane paused when he found his eyes fixating on the entrance where the historic barrier would be cast and broken, time and time again. There was a dark figure laying amongst the dirt and rocks. Zidane climbed down, rushing, pumping his arms, as he leapt over protruding stones and took sharp turns, kicking dust up. He broke into a full on sprint as he ran straight for the reaching cliff, leading to nowhere now. The figure was small and crumpled up, their head tilted away. Zidane's heart was hammering in his chest as he practically tripped to fall beside the body. He felt his knees get skinned raw but he didn't care. He reached down and lifted Bella's head.

“Bella...!” Zidane said, leaning in close to her pale face. ‘Bella, please wake up!’ Gently, he ran his

hand over her chilled cheeks. He pulled her coat back, cringing at the sight of her ravaged right shoulders. Blood still leaked from the wound. She was losing blood quickly. Zidane ripped the sleeve of his shirt, pressing it against her. “Bella, come on!” Zidane pat her cheek again, holding her tightly against him. He was doing everything in his power to stay calm, but he was failing miserably. “HELP!” Zidane screamed upwards, hoping his voice carried. “BEATRIX! STEINER! SOMEBODY HELP!” He was beginning to shake as he pressed Bella against him. Tenderly, he pushed her dark bangs from her still face, his tears falling all over her. “Arabella, please, please...!” He brought her against his chest, feeling her blood seep into his vest. He heard something clatter to the rocks and he lowered the princess. Sniffling, he reached over her and felt the cool facets of the Raven Claw pendant. He gripped it tightly in his palm as the tears kept falling. “Dagger... please... This can’t be happening. This isn’t right! It’s supposed to be me. Not you, not Bella... just me!” Again, he clung to his daughter, tilting his head down.

A moment later, the sound of clanging gear could be heard. Beatrix and Eiko emerged between the narrow corridor of rocks and raced to Zidane’s side.

The king was withdrawing into a catatonic state as Beatrix and Eiko were stunned by Bella's condition. Beatrix pressed her ear to Bella's chin. "She's still breathing."

Eiko felt herself growing into a panic. "There's only one place near here I could think to take her. We have to make haste to Conde Petie. They have clean beds and supplies so we can operate on her." Zidane was quiet, his head still titled down. 'Zidane!' Eiko gripped his shoulder, making him look to her. "We have to hurry. There's still a chance." Zidane exhaled unevenly as he looked over Bella and then towards the destruction of the Iifa Tree. Finally, he nodded, pulling Bella into his arms and standing up. Eiko grabbed Zidane's arm again. "We can do this, Zidane. I know I can save her."

Again, he only nodded at her in a somewhat unhinged fashion and the group took off to round up the others.

32. Pieces

Chapter Thirty-Two

The bath water was steamy and warm. The surface was sudsy with boisterous bubbles that smelled of potpourri. Sarah's hair was in a mountain of sweet blond locks atop her head as she sank into the bath. It had been a nerve wracking arrival in the strange town of short green men who spoke with such thick accents, she only nodded politely instead of asking them to repeat themselves. Bella had been taken to the infirmary with a sleeve rolling Eiko immediately. Zidane had followed. The people of Conde Petie were very hospitable towards them and had whisked the other's away for sunshine and meals. Sarah hadn't eaten much even though Dante pleaded her to. She was in absolute shambles over Bella's condition. She had tried to murder her own sister. She hadn't slept that night and Dante had found her on the bridge, staring towards the boat uplifted by strong branches. He tried to tell her it wasn't her fault, but she couldn't accept that. That morning, when a kind dwarf offered her the use of a bath, she decided she would do it. Princess Sarah was numb as she washed in circles on her hands and

wrists. Bella's crusty blood sunk into the warm water. Kuja was dead. Now, she wasn't sure what was going to happen. She didn't feel fit to continue to be next in line to the throne. In many ways, she still couldn't accept what had happened. She couldn't believe she had allowed herself to be taken control of like that. She wanted to think she was resilient and strong, just like her mother and father... but she wasn't. Her fingers glided over the fleshy scar on her neck and she felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. He couldn't control her any longer, she saw to that, but it didn't make her feel any better or less pressured.

"Hello, Your Highness," Sarah gasped sharply, dropping lower into the water. She gazed over the edge of the bath tub to see Dante sitting on a stool against the far wall of the bathing room. He had bathed the evening before and his brown hair was fluffy and bright again, though he desperately needed a trim. The hair was covering nearly all of his pointy ears. He had bandaged scrapes and bruises on his cheekbone and neck. He looked calm, however, and Sarah was able to relax while still remaining modestly ducked in the tub.

"What are you doing in here? You'll be beheaded if Steiner sees you!" Sarah gripped the edge of the

tub.

“I think it will be fine,” Dante passively waved his hand. “I’ll stay over here. And besides, I think he kind of likes me. He offered me a position on the Knights of Pluto.”

“Really?” Sarah arched her eyebrows. “What did you say?”

“I’m still thinkin’ about it,” Dante shrugged. “Anyway, that’s not why I sneaked in here. I wanted to tell you that Bella is out of surgery. She’s going to be fine.”

Sarah perked up at the mention. “Oh, thank the Gods...” She sank against the back of the tub and sighed. “I think I would have sentenced myself to prison if Bella had died...”

“You didn’t do it,” Dante iterated. “It was Kuja, Sarah. We all know it wasn’t you.”

Sarah cast her eyes down to the now murky brown water, stained with the blood of many of her companions. She felt like a betrayer. “Will you please get me a towel? I’d like to get out.”

“Maybe you should relax a bit longer,” Dante sat forward. “I didn’t mean to disturb your time.”

“I don’t care to sit in the blood of you and my sister...”

The young man was quiet for a few beats, feeling the throbbing of his sword wound on his arm. Sarah’s eyes stared to it as well. He promptly crossed the bathroom and found a towel, turning away as she emerged. Painfully, as if she was trying to elude all the problems in her wake, she unplugged the tub and watched it all swirl away. But she couldn’t wash away the guilt. She held the towel against her chest and sat on the edge of the tub. Dante still remained with his back to her, hurting for Sarah himself. He knew it was futile trying to comfort her so immediately in the aftermath. In many ways, they didn’t win. Kuja still hadn’t played on fair terms. He had used them as pawns against each other. He only wished she didn’t remember that portion.

“I always told myself that one day I would become the queen,” Sarah said quietly, looking at the tile on the floor. “But that I would always pledge to be myself. But how could I do that if... I don’t even like the person that I am...?”

Dante came and sat beside Sarah on the edge of the tub. “I wish I could make you understand, but I

can't." He pressed a hand to her damp bare shoulder. 'Only time can make you understand. Everything that you've done has been for your family and for your kingdom. You fought for yourself, you protected yourself. When that time comes, I know the people will be happy to accept you. You should, too. And... I think you're pretty bad ass, also.' A small smile came across Sarah's face fleeting and she sighed, pressing her hand over his. "Things will get better, Sarah. I promise."

She turned her large blue eyes on him. "I believe you, Dante..."

Twenty-three hours later, Eiko sat down for the first time kind help of Kuja's refugees took Bella back to her room to rest. Eiko's entire body ached, her hands were shaking. She looked down at all the dried blood smeared nearly up to her elbows. There had been very many ups and downs during the tedious procedure. Eiko pressed a hand to her temple, relishing in the silence of the infirmary. The distant hoots of owls carried through the open windows showing off the beautiful day it was shaping up to be. Eiko cringed as she recalled the few bleak moments she thought the surgery may go

wrong or Bella was plummeting. Zidane had left the moment Eiko began sterilizing the operating site on Bella. She didn't know where he was or where he had gone. Miraculously, Dante had the same blood type as Bella and was able to donate it. Eiko believed it saved her life. But still, she quivered at the idea of coming that close to losing all control of the situation. Eiko could rest assured everyone would board the ship she would send for once she found an Owl Messenger. Eiko lifted her head, gazing towards the bland orange desert scape and rigid landscape of the continent. She wanted to go home. Even though two decades ago... this would have been home. It didn't feel like it anymore. Her priorities in life were elsewhere. Sometimes, there'd be long stretches between the fleeting memories of growing up in Madain Sari. And maybe that's why this had happened. It was her punishment. She was to ravish in her turmoil, stew in her confictions. She did not honor the tribe and for that, the whole tribe had to suffer. Uncaring on the dried blood on her hands, she pressed her hands to her lips. She didn't want to think about what would have happened if Bella had died. Eiko closed her eyes to shake the thoughts away.

“Eiko, there you are,” Freya appeared in the door. ‘I’ve drawn a bath for you. You should lay down for a little bit, I’m sure you’re exhausted.’ Eiko was silent and unmoving. The princess didn’t even acknowledge Freya’s presence. The soldier came further into the room. “Congratulations, by the way. You’re an excellent medic, Eiko. It calls for celebration upon your return to Lindblum.”

“... I almost lost her,” Eiko finally said, folding her red hands in her lap. “There was a moment her heart didn’t beat.”

“Eiko...” Freya sighed, lowering herself into the chair beside the rather catatonic Summoner. “Take it from someone who has been involved in large field battles. Things are going to go wrong in the heat of the moment when you’re desperate to apply aid. You worked over her and stabilized her. It took you nearly an entire day, but you didn’t stop. Arabella’s alive. That’s the most important part. You’re a lifesaver, Eiko.”

Eiko shook her head, tilting her eyes down. “Where is Zidane?”

“I haven’t seen him since yesterday,” Freya told her. ‘I’m sure he’s wondering somewhere around here.’ Eiko stood in the next moment, crossing

towards the door. Freya leapt up. "Eiko, wait! You're covered in blood. You should sleep! You may alarm the residents!" But the princess didn't listen and the flutter of her coat followed her out the door. Eiko's boots were loud to the cobblestone paths compared to the dwarves hemp sandals. She glanced around every corner and darted up every staircase, uncaring of the growing eyes of residents. Some of them asked how the wee one was doing, but Eiko paid them no mind. As she huffed across a bridge, she stopped and turned. Zidane was sitting in the boat, holding one of the waxy candles that sat on the platform. She paused, watching his unmoving body. He and Dagger had taken a false oath on that platform with the golden sunlight streaming over them. Zidane sat criss cross, watching the flame of the candle before he looked towards the altar. He remembered all his chaotic comedic stewing in his mind. Dagger's passiveness was fondly recalled. Who knew it was only a prelude of the amazing times to come? He smiled, rather sadly. Bursts of Dagger's angelic face in the summon flashed by his eyes. She was all he could think about. It felt like he had only just lost her all over again. Had she really become her own Eiodolon to protect their daughter's? He wanted to think that every night, the brightest twinkling star in the sky was her. Maybe it

actually was. But his insides constricted all over again as he thought to his daughter's. He had screwed up miserably. Sarah was an utter emotional mess, rightfully so. Bella's state was grave. And Alex was probably worried sick back in Burmecia. She always hated being alone. He failed the entire mission. He was convinced Kuja had won. For a moment, he wished Dagger hadn't transported him out with the rest. Zidane lowered his head to look at the candle. He should have gone down with Kuja all those years ago, anyway.

“Zidane...” Eiko said very gently from the stairs, clasping her hands together. The king clambered to his feet nearly dropping the candle.

“Is she...?”

“She’s going to be fine, Zidane,” Eiko nodded. “The surgery was successful.”

There was only a beat before Zidane surged forward, wrapping his arms around Eiko’s achy thin body. She was stunned, but wrapped her arms around him, too. “Thank you, Eiko... you... you saved my baby...”

Eiko smiled into his shoulder, pressing her palms flat to his back. “You’re not the only one who loves

her, Zidane..."

When Zidane finally got to be at Bella's side, he refused to leave it. His middle child was soundly asleep, but she didn't seem to be in much pain, at least. Zidane dabbed cool rags to her pale face and combed her hair. He watched her tentatively, stooped in his stool. As he leaned against her soft bed, listening to the owls hoot beyond the window, and the gentle sun bleed into the room, Zidane recounted everything that had happened. Gently he combed the dark locks of Bella's hair from the frame of her face, caressing her cheeks. It was still amazing how much she resembled her mother. The king sighed as he watched his daughter slumber, hour after hour. He pressed his head to the pillow beside her, gripping her hand. When he heard the door to the room open, he lifted his head, quite foggy as to how long it had actually been. The crisp evening light streamed through the windows, falling over his oldest daughter, who stood there with her hands clasped in front of her. She had bathed and cleaned up nicely. Zidane could almost believe, fleetingly, that they were back home and everything was normal. But her clothes ruined the moment as

Zidane saw they were still dirty and ravaged, splattered in ruminating shades of blood. Sarah's eyes were looking towards her little sister longingly and she rushed to be by her side. She clambered onto the foot of the bed, pressing a hand to Bella's leg. Sarah's blue eyes were intent as she watched Bella's chest rise and fall. Finally, she let out the breath she was holding.

"I can't believe she made it..." Sarah whispered, her lips barely moving. "I... I'm so relieved. Daddy, I thought I had killed her."

Zidane smiled weakly, reaching for her hand. "All three of you are more resilient than that. You've got your mother inside of you."

Sarah squeezed his hand. "... and you, Daddy." They were quiet for a moment and she did her best to return the smile. But her eyes still kept taking her back to her slumbering sister. "Oh, Bella..." She sighed. "I wish you'd open your eyes. Talk to me. Let me know you're still you. I'm sorry, Bella. I'm so sorry."

Fleetingly, the somewhat fuzzy memories returned to her here and there. They caused her great pain as she remembered how she was not in control. She couldn't stop herself despite her mind

screaming the exact opposite of what her body was doing. Never had she felt so helpless before. And it made her hate herself; as much as she did Kuja. Zidane watched his daughter stew in her conflicts. He knew there was a lot on her mind. There were several things clouding his brain, as well. All he could do was swat them away and simply be thankful that everyone was alive. It had come down to the wire, just as it had the time before, but again, the Tribal's managed to squeeze out of it.

“Hey,” Zidane said gently, drawing Sarah’s eyes away from Bella. “I want you to know I’m proud of you... and I know your mother is, too. Sometimes the journey isn’t always the most memorable part, but instead, the outcome. Kuja is gone, I know he is. I’m feeling a lot more normal again, like a fog lifted from my mind that I didn’t even know was there. What about you? How are you feeling?”

“Well, the rage is gone,” Sarah told him. “No more blinding headaches. I think he’s gone, too.”

“I know you’re blaming yourself. You have it written all over your face... just like your mother,” Zidane shook his head. “You have nothing to be sorry for. If it had been anyone else, it may have

been the same exact outcome. And I think you still had some control. That sword was going directly for Bella's heart but at the last moment... you turned it. Even with Kuja in control, I don't think he could have made you kill the ones you loved."

"It's not even just that," Sarah shifted on the bed, hugging her knees. 'I drew my sword on an innocent victim all in the name of paranoia... and I turned my sword on you, Daddy. That's... almost blasphemous; a king and a father.' Sarah straightened up a little. "I don't think I'm fit for the throne, Daddy. I don't think I can be the Queen."

"You know," Zidane glanced to Bella. "I think you're getting ahead of yourself. That's further down the road and... well, you're wrong, I'm sorry. You're an excellent swordsman. You fought for your kingdom. You're hero, just like your mother was."

"Mother was sheer power..." Sarah sighed. "I haven't even got a backbone."

Zidane reached forward, tilting her chin up. "What you've done for this kingdom and will continue to do will be honorable, Sarah. You don't have to live your life according to how others think you should. You also don't have to directly follow your parent's footsteps. You have to live your life on

your own terms. And besides... I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, okay?" He offered her a smile. Sarah offered a weak grin to him and pulled herself further into the bed, laying herself down beside her little sister. It was familiar to Sarah, who had spent many nights coaxing the young girl to sleep during thunderstorms after their mother passed. Sarah gently took hold of her hand, watching her still slumbering face.

"Daddy, will you tell us a story?" Sarah asked, looking to him.

Zidane smiled lopsidedly now. He couldn't remember the last time he had both of them together, enraptured for a tale. "What do you want to hear?"

"None other," Sarah's eyes looked excited. Zidane just about melted over it. "*I Want To Be Your Canary.*"

"Of course," Zidane laughed, shifting on the stool. "You know, you're all very lucky I have it memorized..."

Supper in the Burmecian Castle was the same scene as usual. The somewhat grim and dark dining

hall, so moody compared to the light environment of the Alexandrian Castle. Several nobles, the rulers themselves, all tucked together at the table, having quiet and well mannered conversations. There was the familiar roasted duck, butternut squash, pumpkin seeds, and sourdough loaves. And again, Princess Alexandra found herself with her head tilted down as she ate quietly, picking at the airy layers of the bread. The nobles were laughing about taxes, just like they did in those silly cartoons in the *Alexandrian Post*. Alex found it all quite boring and she wasn't even interested in snooping on conversations. The storm was much more lively that evening with lightning glaring through the windows. A passing maid pressed another dollop of mashed potatoes to her plate, scurrying on. Alex sighed.

Something different happened at supper that evening, however. The chamber doors swung open forcefully, intrusively, and prematurely. Some people looked quite pestered by the disruption. Other's were intrigued and sympathetic to see a very wet scribe runner. He was panting as he reached into his vest, withdrawing a scroll he had secured very tenderly from the rain. "My apologies for the interruption, I bring the utmost important news, word from Lady Eiko of Lindblum." Alex gasped,

leaning forward to see the scribe. “It reads, ‘Kuja and the Iifa Tree have been vanquished. Please send Princess Alexandra to Lindblum. Regards, Lady Eiko’.”

“They did it?!” Alex sprung to her feet on top of the chair, uncaring if it was unladylike. ‘Hey, mister, do you got a letter from my dad in your bag? Any word on my sisters? Arowyn, Arowyn!’ She turned to the embarrassed looking maid. “Did you hear that?! I don’t have to be the Queen, after all!”

“Yes... very good, Princess Alexandra...”

“This calls for a toast,” The King stood, raising his chalice. “The strength of the Four Nations shall prevail.”

“Here, here,” Everyone else lifted their glasses in return. Alex lifted her apple juice, still standing, with the happiest grin on her face.

“... and Lindblum is on their way to get us. Perhaps only half a day away,” Eiko explained to Freya as they took a mid-morning stroll. Eiko had cleaned up, but exhaustion was still evident on her face. Even Freya herself was still reeling. Nobody

quite expected the mind-bobbling aftermath of the whole ordeal and nobody seemed to be processing it very well. Still, though, Eiko walked with her proper poise, her hands behind her back despite her desperately aching shoulders. “We have more supplies and technology to help Arabella there.”

“She still hasn’t woken up, has she?” Freya asked as they paused on the crest of the bridge, looking towards the obscure boat, glistening in the golden morning rays.

“She’s in shock,” Eiko said without looking to her companion. “The wound and the complete summon most likely drained her beyond her mental capacity. Some more donated blood and medicines to ease the pain, she’ll wake up. That’s why we must go to Lindblum.”

“How are Zidane and Sarah?” Freya crossed her arms over her chest, now peaking a look at the Princess.

“They’re dealing with it the best they can,” Eiko reported. “We should probably bring them breakfast.”

“Are you alright?” Freya turned to her. “You’re not sleeping or eating yourself. You should stop

trying to make sure everyone else is. Just because Zidane isn't around to be leader, doesn't mean you have to take his burdens on, Eiko. You have yourself to think about, too."

Eiko was quiet and her face was somewhat stony, but cracks were forming at the edges. "I'm fine. At least, I will be. What's important now—"

"Is your wellbeing."

Eiko took in a deep breath, staring hard at Freya. "I saw things I didn't want to see, Freya. It was different when I was the kid following you all around. This time, I was the adult, and we almost lost two very important children."

"But we didn't, Eiko. They're alive. They're breathing," Freya shook her head. "Going back to Lindblum will be good for all of us. We've been out here far too long."

"Yes," Eiko glanced to the boat once more, a long silky lock of hair grazing her cheek. "And I don't ever want to come back here again."

By dusk, a loud humming airship was landing in the plains near Conde Petie. The drawves all

gathered to gawk and ‘ooh’ at the opportunity of seeing an airship so close. Of course, the kind residents of Conde Petie were profusely told thank you and the airship generously gave them a bag of Gil. Zidane felt somewhat disassociated as he emerged from the small village nettled in the canyon. In his arms, wrapped tightly in white linens, was Bella. Her head tilted against his chest as she continued to sleep. Beside him, a tired Sarah held her backpack and sword carelessly at her side. The propellers of the machine lifted their hair and they cringed at the noise. But still, Bella did not stir. Together, as twilight overcame the Outer Continent, the King and his Princesses hurriedly crossed the plains to ascend the ship that would take them back to some form of familiarity.

33. Due Time

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Beatrix... Beatrix, wake up!” There was a gentle nudge against her shoulder. The General wanted to swat whoever it was *away*. She hadn’t laid on a real bed in over a week. Couldn’t they understand her back was killing her and the pillow was helping ease up her impending migraine? The hand came to shake her again, however, and that’s when the droning of the airship filled her ears. An airship bed wasn’t nearly as divine as the one in her living barracks, but it sure was better than the cold slabs of Madain Sari. Beatrix gripped the thin cotton blanket, turning her face downward into the pillow, despite the fact it smelled like mothballs. ‘Beatrix, come on now... we’ll be docking soon.’ The voice was finally familiar to her and sleepily, Beatrix tilted her head to have her vision filled with the tender face of Steiner. His short cropped brown hair was disheveled atop his head. “We slept the entire trip,” Steiner said, re-situating the tunic on his broad shoulders. “Lindblum is on the horizon.” Beatrix laid flat to the bed now, letting out a long sigh. She rubbed at the

side of her face, her brown curls splaying around her. “How are you feeling?”

Beatrix turned her head towards him. “Like a recruit in the army again.”

They both managed to smile at each other and Steiner eased down to lay next to her. “Are you... still thinking about what you said in Madain Sari?”

She sighed, folding her hands over her stomach. Beatrix gazed to the dull planks above her head, listening to the consistent hum of the airship engines. “Yes. I keep thinking about what I said and I don’t even know what I meant, Steiner. Especially now... after what I saw, I don’t know what I want anymore. Everything if affecting me differently than the time’s before. I feel like I close my eyes and all I can see is the replaying of that sword going through Bella over and over again. I’ve never experienced that myself, after countless battles and wars. And I let it happen to her. I’m not fit to be a General.”

Steiner pressed his head to her shoulder. “We did everything we can... and you know that whatever is going to happen during a battle... it’s going to happen. You can’t stop everything, Beatrix. And Eiko has assured me Bella will be fine. I think it will make her stronger.” Steiner lifted his head to look at

her now. “Are you saying you don’t want to be the General anymore? Is that what this is really about?”

Beatrix was quiet for a few beats before uselessly shrugging. “I don’t know, Steiner... I don’t know what I want anymore. Not after all of this. I don’t know if I want to stay in Alexandria or... if I should go somewhere else.”

“But where would you go?” Steiner shook his head. After a moment of silence, he wrapped his arms around her. “I can’t change your mind about anything. Not you, being so stubborn. But even after everything that has happened, Beatrix, I think there’s something beautiful about Alexandria. Sarah, Bella, and Alex are a special thing to me. They’re my link to Garnet. No matter how much time wanes on... I can’t stop thinking about her. And I feel even stronger for Alexandria than I did before all of this because Garnet showed us she was still here. She’s still watching us, Beatrix.”

“Maybe that’s what I want...” Beatrix whispered, tenderly grabbing the arm wrapped around her midriff. ‘I was terrified of losing you, Steiner. That’s what’s so damn hard about caring for people. They could be gone in an instant and you’re left to clean it all up. Maybe I just want a link to you.’ Steiner

lifted his head, cocking his eyebrows up. “Maybe... we should have a baby, Steiner.”

“Me? A father?” Steiner sat up now, his cheeks burning. Beatrix sat up, too, gaging his reaction. “But Beatrix... you’ve always been adamant that you never wanted children.”

“A woman can change her mind, can’t she?” Beatrix tilted her head. “I don’t want to die, Steiner, and all they write on my grave is ‘Ruthless General. Killed many’. I want to be remembered entirely different.”

Steiner looked to her deeply in that moment. The General was at a crossroads in her life. He had been to that same fork in the road tens years ago when Garnet had died. Mortality was staring everyone in the face, one by one. In the seventeen years of peace, maybe she didn’t have these things to consider. But yet again, barely making it out alive, had brought all these questions and what if scenarios back to her mind. Beatrix looked absolute, as she always did. After a beat, he took her slender hand in his.

“If that’s what you want, Beatrix,” Steiner nodded.

“It is... I really do think that.”

“Well then...” Steiner’s cheeks became red again and Beatrix wondered faintly if he had ever grown used to being in a sensitive moment with her in the past fifteen years. “Let’s make a family, Beatrix.”

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck. “In due time...”

Civilization hit Zidane full force, like running directly into a brick wall. A week away from the entirety of ordinary life certainly had him reeling, as it had when he had first returned from his last journey. When they docked in the Lindblum Castle, the cabin was barraged with medics carrying stretchers. Bella was the only one taken out. Zidane followed curtly on their heels but slowed his pace as he emerged into the airship dock of the familiar structure. Plush maroon carpets, tall, gallant gold beams that looked so foreign and futuristic. Sarah stood beside him, also taking it all in. She hadn’t been to Lindblum in years. Zidane would lie and say a princess was under the weather to avoid Cid and Hilda’s annual anniversary party. “Seasonal allergies” Zidane remembered scrawling on the

RSVP card. Zidane took a deep breath and raked his hair from his eyes, looking over the railing of the deck to see the medics wasting no time in jogging away with Bella. His heart wrenched for a moment.

“Daddy!” Was called shrilly across the platform. Zidane’s neck nearly broke, he snapped it so quickly to spy Princess Alexandra, clad in a blue and white frilly dress, standing at the stairs descending from the airship taxis. Princess Alexandra dropped her backpack in an instant and darted across the platform. Zidane also wasted no time, flinging his backpack off, his boots thudding to the deck. He leapt the railing to the descending plank and met Alex halfway, collapsing to his knees and gathering her up into his arms. He ran his hands through her curly blond hair, placing kisses all over her head. She wrapped her arms and legs around the torso of her father, using even her tail to hug him. Zidane nearly fell across the floor as he held her so tightly against him. Eventually Sarah caught up and the entire family shared a reunion of happy tears.

“Wait... where’s Bella?” Alex looked around, a panic nearly washing over her.

“She’s here,” Zidane gripped her hand. “She just has to go see a doctor, that’s all.”

“But... she’s okay?” Alex blinked her wet dark little doe eyes.

“She is, pumpkin,” Zidane nodded. ‘At least, she will be.’ And just like that, he switched into a different state of mind. “Everything is alright, though. Let’s go put our things down in the guest room. We can catch up and freshen up. I’m sure the doctor will come find us to let us know about Bella.”

“Alright,” Alex nodded, turning to go retrieve her forgotten luggage.

“We aren’t... going to tell her the whole story, are we?” Sarah asked as she and her father stood. The help of Lindblum was already taking care of their luggage.

Zidane stuck his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know what to even say to her...”

“It’s only fair we tell her the truth, though, I suppose...” Sarah shook her head. “She’ll be angry with us later. She’ll find out.”

“Yeah,” Zidane sighed. “It’s best she hears it from us. I think between you and I... we can do it.” Sarah grinned, glancing over at her father.

Alex wanted to brush her hair when they got to the guest room. Playfully, Sarah tied a ribbon around her tail to raise her spirits. Zidane found himself on the bed, watching his girls chatter on the platform above. He let out a long sigh, stretching his legs out. He was so achy. Zidane wished in that moment he still had the same body as before. He didn't remember being so sore the first time around. Finally, Alex decided her curls were just right and in her energetic way, she hustled down the short flight of stairs, leaping onto the bed beside her father's.

“Tell me about the journey! Did you tell Kuja to leave us alone for good?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Zidane nodded. “Actually, Sarah saw to that.”

Sarah blushed, leaning against the railing of the platform. “He left himself wide open. Anyone else could have or would have done the same.”

“Wow!” Alex’s eyes lit up, turning to look at Sarah. “So you stopped Kuja!”

“Everyone else helped, too,” Sarah iterated.

“Yeah, tell me about what a great hero and Summoner Bella was!” Alex nodded. Zidane already felt total dread washing over him, knowing he would

flounder finding the proper words. Sarah had to clear her throat and cross to the stairs as a means to distract herself. But willingly, and thankfully, the door below to the guest room opened and closed not too soon after. The family watched the stairs tentatively, not quite sure who to expect. Dante emerged, now dressed back in his common clothes of dark pants with a white tunic. He had his hair trimmed and was looking much more refreshed with clean bandages. Alex forgot her first question entirely, leaping from the bed. ‘And the knighted boy returns!’ She paused. “We are knighting him for this, right?”

Sarah grinned from the top of the stairs, descending in her tulip pink dress with the straight skirt. “Of course he will be.” She couldn’t help but think knighting was definitely fitting. He had the utter most pristine timing on everything. Coming in to her life, especially. “He was quite the hero out there, too, Alex.”

Alex squealed at an octave unknown to man. “That means you two are getting married, right?! The Knight and the Princess, oh, how romantic!” Alex nearly swooned right off her feet and Dante’s quick reflexes steadied her by grabbing her shoulder. ‘You should get married in the spring, just like

Daddy and Momma did!' Alex looked eagerly between the two. "You've seen the paintings, Sarah! You could even wear Momma's dress!" Zidane grinned, watching his daydreaming girl drift away.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sarah shook her head politely. "We've only just returned, Alex. Spring is around the corner, anyway. There's no time to plan anything extravagant."

"Besides," Zidane slid off the side of the bed now despite his body protesting. He came towards Alex, whisking her up into his arms. It had been a long time since he held her and he relished in the feeling. Just another year or two and she would be far too large to pick up. Excitedly, Alex wrapped her arms around her father's neck, her dark eyes looking to him expectantly. "We have something else to plan first. And that might just be a special person's tenth birthday. Don't tell me you forgot!"

"Oh..." Alex's cheeks burned intensely. Quickly, she bucked up. "No, never! I've even been thinking about what I want!"

"What's that, princess?" Zidane asked. "It better not be a Chocobo, I've told you before, we don't have a stable for it."

“Alright...” Alex looked to him as if she didn’t quite believe him. “Well, I want cards!”

“Of course,” Sarah crossed her arm over her chest.

“*And a card tournament at my birthday party. And I want to invite the friends I made in Burmecia.*”

“You made friends in Burmecia?” Zidane furrowed his brow, shifting her across his hips. ‘Were there other children at the castle?’ Alex shook her head. “You weren’t supposed to leave the castle. I told them that.”

“You expected me to obey that rule?” Alex tilted her head, a sweet blond lock of hair grazing her rosy cheek. ‘While you guys were off having a grand, fun adventure together, I was almost bored *to death* so I had to come up with my own adventure.’ Sarah nearly face palmed and Dante had to hold a snicker in. “And I met these really nice boys! They have to come, please, Daddy!”

“And just how am I supposed to find these mysterious boys in all of Burmecia to invite them?” Zidane cocked an eyebrow up.

“Oh, I know where they would be, trust me!”

Dinner was much a different scene and the change was refreshing and replenishing for Alex. She ate the boar's leg and the mashed sweet potatoes and fried cheese bread. The food in Lindblum was heavy and festive, just how Regent Cid liked it. Wine was free flowing that night as the returned heroes gathered in the gallant dining room of the castle. Zidane was quiet as he sipped his wine. He more preferred to simply observe and offer small quips. But his mind that evening was preoccupied by Bella. Still, she laid in bed with her head tilted and her face unmoving. She was stable the doctor's had reported. Zidane hoped at least she was with Dagger in her slumber. In the glitter of the candlelight, Zidane could spy how pleased Cid was to speak with Eiko again. No matter how reserved and humble he liked to pride himself on being, there was no denying the adoption of Eiko had brought something wonderful to his life; as if she were his own. Eiko glanced down the table at Zidane with her bright face and inquisitive blue eyes. All he could was look down, though, at the ripples in his wine glass.

A butter knife clanked against the side of a glass and a hush came over the table and serving bowls ceased to be passed. Regent Cid stood, his fur cape

falling heavily behind his broad, squared shoulders. “Tonight we celebrate a worthy cause; a return of our heroes who, some twice over, have restored the faith and strength of the Four Nations. I find myself lucky to know such wonderful, selfless people. People who would give the shirt off their backs to a stranger. To King Zidane, I give my utmost honor. Your dignity is palpable. To Princess Sarah, Your Highness, may you have your wine like the hero you are tonight. Sir Dante Bare of Alexandria, what you have done for the Four Nations shall not be forgotten. Your family has our loyalty and our service. A toast to you, young man,” Regent Cid lifted his glass in a languid salutatory way. Dante sheepishly tilted his head down. From beneath the table, Sarah grabbed his hand. ‘And, of course, we could never forget our ever-faithful General and Captain of Alexandria. Quite the dynamic duo who has always seen to the safety of the princesses. Lady Freya of Burmecia, your kingdom holds a special place in my heart and as leader of the Dragoon’s, I know I can rest peacefully at night. And last but not least... Eiko,’ Cid turned his eyes on the young woman whose gleaming purple fishtail braid fell over her shoulder. “You continue to make me proud, young one...”

“Here, here!” Lady Hilda lifted her glass. “To the heroes!”

“Zidane, would you care to say anything?” Cid gazed down the long table to the other end. Zidane had his eyes fixated on his plate, but when he heard his name, her perked up at attention, realizing everyone’s eyes were on him. He pursed his lips and held his wine glass lamely in his hand before he sighed and rose from his chair. Zidane cleared his throat, tucking a hand in his pocket, as he gazed at all the familiar faces at the table. Alex was beaming like the sun at him. Even Sarah was grinning and it looked so genuine. He let out a sigh, somehow a lopsided grin coming across his face. He hated giving speeches. That had always been Dagger’s strong suit. Her melodious voice delivered news tenderly. Zidane only thought he came across as nervous and unsure; everything a king shouldn’t be.

“What a strange, strange journey it was,” Zidane shrugged sheepishly. ‘But somehow, like we always do, we manage to squeeze through in one piece. I could never thank any of you enough for what you’ve done for me... and the continued growth and peace of Alexandria. You are all... my best friends...” Zidane paused for a moment, gazing at the elaborate shiny gold candelabra in the center of

the table.” I only wish our other friend’s could be here with us... besides Amarant, who just bailed on us... but Vivi, Dagger... I know they would be proud of us, too. At least, I hope so.’ Zidane straightened his shoulders, looking around the quiet, unmoving dinner guests. “A toast to all of you for helping make this happen. For restoring a world I want to leave for my daughter’s; one without tricks and dark secrets... but a world full of wonders and mysteries not yet explored. Cheers for that. To Sir Dante Bare of Alexandria,” Zidane turned on the young man whose eyes grew wide at the sudden announcement. Zidane reached to his belt loop, withdrawing a small hunting knife. Carefully, he brought it forward to his shoulder and paused. “As King of Alexandria, I knight thee Lord Dante of Alexandria. Thank you... you saved my life multiple times on that trip. The throne is indebted to you.” A round of applause rang out around the table and Dante grinned, his almond skin gleaming in the candlelight.

Sarah looked towards her father. “Wait... but we’ll have a real ceremony for him at the castle, right?” Laughter now echoed towards the high vaulted ceilings of the dining hall.

“Cheers!” Steiner grinned, lifting his glass. The group resounded in harmony after Steiner, clinging their glasses together. Between all the movement, Zidane spied Eiko at the other end, beside her father. She was smiling, her head rest in her hand. She lifted her glass towards Zidane and after a moment, Zidane did the same.

The crickets and cicadas of Lindblum were a comforting noise. It was a cool night and the smell of sweet pollen drifted through the air with the arrival of spring. For Zidane, it almost felt like the past eight months of his life ceased to exist. Like he was waking up for the first time and it was all just a bad dream. He sat at the highest point of Lindblum, laying across the brick half-walling of the upper balcony. Beside him, the rusty flaking telescope creaked with the breeze. Zidane gazed up towards the stars, carelessly dangling a leg off the edge. A cigarette was perched in his mouth as he lost count in the sky yet again. He inhaled deeply. That angelic face of Dagger in the Iifa Tree was still engraved prominently in his mind. Those soft pink lips and dark eyes with bold lashes and brow... she was the force she always was, summon or tangible. He felt

washed-up with the lovesick feeling he had for her. At her funeral reception, many nobles had told Zidane ‘it gets easier’. But when? How many hours or days or weeks or months or years? For him, it had been ten years and two months and still, the hardship in his heart remained. After so long, he still couldn’t figure out how to process it. Now, it was an even tighter knot in his stomach, knowing Kuja ultimately played a part in it.

“Your Majesty?”

Zidane arched his eyebrows and sat up, lowering the cigarette from his mouth. Dante was standing at the top of the stairs. He took a moment to gaze towards the large mountains, separating them from their home. “Dante,” Zidane looked around, realizing he was alone. ‘You don’t have to call me that. It’s Zidane, alright?’ He flicked his cigarette over the edge. He paused, looking towards Dante. “Are you here to ask for my daughter’s hand in marriage?”

Dante looked startled, holding his hands up. “N... no... not particularly,” Dante shook his head. ‘I... had another request to make.’ The young man crossed the narrow balcony, sitting down on the ledge opposite of Zidane. “Maybe this sounds

blasphemous but I believe that it would be good if I could take Sarah on a grand adventure. Take her to the marshlands, to see Burmecia, the Shrine of Cleyra, Treno... I think it would be best she sees the continent she's destined to rule for herself. Let her come to terms with it on her own."

"Huh, wasn't expecting a request like that," Zidane tilted his head. He sighed clasping his hands together. "I can't say no... I don't have a reason to. A year ago, it would have been out of the question but now... with all the shit that has happened, I have no reason to justify turning it down. I only would have done it because I was scared. You two should go and see the world. I think I can hold things down until she's ready to come back and be the Queen."

Dante grinned. "Thank you, Your Ma-... Zidane."

"You know," Zidane brought a knee towards his chest. "Steiner told me he had offered you a spot on the Knights of Pluto. You puttin' that on hold?"

"I want to do it," Dante said, but paused, furrowing his brow. "I am my father's only son. I'm supposed to be a craftsman... an artisan, like all the men in our family."

“Let me ask you a fun question,” Zidane reached into his vest, pulling another cigarette from the complimentary silver case of the Lindblum Castle. He struck the match along his boot and looked to Dante as the end cherried. ‘Do you intend on marrying my daughter, Lord Dante?’ The young man’s cheeks became as red as tomatoes. “Come on, don’t be so embarrassed. It’s a pure question: do you want to marry Sarah?”

“Of course I do,” Dante said as evenly as he could. “I believe I love her, sir. But it’s all with due time, isn’t it?”

“If you became Prince, Dante, you couldn’t be a shoemaker, anyway. I’m sorry, but it’s a packaged deal. She is going to rule Alexandria.”

Dante sighed and nodded. “You’re right.”

“Love always wins, Dante,” Zidane exhaled a plume of smoke into the inky night. “Besides... I know exactly how you feel. Before I met Queen Garnet, I was a vagabond. In Lindblum, they called us wandering Bohemians. I stole for a living, put on little theatrical numbers to distract people while we swiped valuable things. Destiny has a funny way about it. The heart wants what it wants and you can’t change that. And don’t ever wonder to yourself

‘how the hell did I get here?’ because you’ll never answer it. Take it from me.”

“You know... stealing was the only way I was able to attend Sarah’s birthday party,” Dante told him. Zidane arched his eyebrows. “Didn’t it seem odd I was there, hanging out with a bunch of Noble kids? The evening of the party, I hung out by the hotels in the plaza. And when some Noble children came out from their hotels, I followed them to the restaurant they were eating at and swiped an admissions ticket from one of their purses. It was wrong, I know. She had come all the way to Alexandria to attend the party, but I wanted to go more, I was sure of it.”

Zidane grinned and chuckled, lowering his cigarette. “You know, Dante, we’re gonna have the scholars scratching their heads as they pore over the Throne of Alexandria history books in the future.”

The sound of heels clacking against the pavement caught the men’s attention and they gazed down towards the lower balconies with the slanted moonlit shadows of the pillars. Eiko’s slender body, wrapped in a silk robe, emerged in the glossy night time light. She stopped at the base of the stairs, nearly panting. “Zidane!” She called. “Arabella has awaken.”

Zidane didn't even wait for her to finish the sentence before he stood and threw his cigarette off the balcony.

34. A New Chapter in Life

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was practically raining cherry blossoms in Alexandria on that bright, promising spring day. Not a cloud in the cerulean blue sky and the breeze smelled sweet with honeysuckles and vibrantly bursting tulip bulbs. Gold and blue flags waved from the posts surrounding the castle as a steady stream of people crossed the small river and dozens of others climbed a top roofs. Alexandria was alive with energy, constant buzzing chatter, and resounding hoots and hollers. The throne was at peace again and the spirit and unwavering devotion to Zidane was whole. They touted his name as they crossed in the buckling mandalas. Women threw rose and lily petals in their wake and several people were already dancing along to the brassy band buzzing from the edge of the water front courtyard. Gold and blue silk banners lined the hedges, along with numerous servers strutting about with champagnes, cheeses, and puff-filled pastries. It was a momentous day in Alexandria. The knighting of a hero and the splendid celebration of the tenth birthday of delightful and

bubbly princess of Alexandria: none other than Princess Alexandra.

Zidane hated the suit he had to wear. It was pressed much too crisp and he felt like he could barely bend his elbows. He tugged at the stuffy white gloves on his hands as he began down the hall from his chambers to meet the others for the knighting ceremony. He tugged at the dinner jacket and pulled at the annoying lace bib tucked in with his shirt. Events like this made him feel like a jackass. He was wearing a suit that cost more than equity of the Tantalus hideout in Lindblum. As he rounded a corner, he ran directly into Beatrix, who seemed to be on the prowl for him. She sighed and crossed her arms as she looked at Zidane from head to toe.

“What? Something on my face?” Zidane asked, rubbing his cheek.

“There are some missing elements from your outfit,” Beatrix clucked. “The cape? And the crown, for god’s sake, Zidane.”

“I don’t want to wear them,” Zidane protested, walking beside Beatrix now as they made their way closer to the foyer. “They’re gaudy and flamboyant.

They know I'm the King, we don't always have to announce it. I bleed the same blood as them.”

“This is a very formal event,” Beatrix told him. “Knighting someone is an important part of the legacy of the Alexandrian Throne. Every ruler whose ever touched the sacred sword to one's shoulders has always been wearing *the crown*.”

“Oh, and what about the Alexandrian throne today is keeping in line with that legacy?” Zidane gave Beatrix a side-eye. “Look, I'm all for tradition, but sometimes, you just gotta do things your way, Beatrix.”

“And the rest of us take the highway, hm?” She shot him a faint grin. Zidane paused abruptly. Beatrix took a few more steps before turning back to him with arched eyebrows. Zidane was unmoving as he gawked at a large painting on the wall. He had to walk past it everyday and without fail, he always stopped to look at it. It was a vibrant painting that stood out amongst the dark and aged paintings that had hung for nearly a century on the walls. Queen Garnet was at the center of the painting, her body drenched in gold silks with blue hemming. Her crown was situated delicately atop her thick onyx hair that fell over her shoulders as she was seated in

her throne. In her lap, wrapped in green satins that shimmered with the artist's perfect brush strokes, was Princess Alexandra, only weeks old at this point. And standing on either side of Garnet were six year old Sarah and three year old Arabella. Their hands reached towards their mother, touching her legs and arms. All of their bold eyes stared at Zidane as he recounted the week the painting had been done. Garnet would be dead in only six months. "Zidane..." Beatrix reached for his arm. "Come on... the people are waiting."

It was going to be Zidane's first public appearance since the events unraveled. Nobody had seen the King since the reparations of the great fires that previous winter. Zidane watched Garnet intently, asking her to please watch him over, before finally, he allowed Beatrix's tugging to coerce him. He moved silently beside Beatrix, trying to get himself to straighten his shoulders and tilt his head up. Eventually, the duo came upon the balcony railing to peer down into the foyer. And he found five pairs of eyes gazing at him from the brightly lit room below. The castle doors were open and cherry blossoms fluttered across the sparkling marble floor, adhering to the thick red carpets. The room felt so alive with the blossoming planet, the air refreshing

and free. Steiner grinned up towards the balcony and Beatrix couldn't help but smile back.

Sarah was looking utterly beautiful that day. Her thick blond hair had been swept into an intricate up-do with elaborate braiding and a bun that creased like a delicate rose at the top of her head. She wore a lacy silk blue dress with satin sleeves that accentuated her slender body. The Raven Claw pendant hung proudly from her neck, diamond earrings glinting in the spring sun. Beside her stood the man of honor, Sir Dante Bare. He wore a puffy gold and blue velvet vest with shimmering white sleeves and long dark pants that put emphasis on his height. His brown hair, usually shaggy, had been swept to the side and his pointy ears protruded from his head. Not far away stood the birthday girl whose blond hair had been furiously curled. The large locks beat against her little head, a sparkly tiara miraculously holding true on top of the voluminous do. She wore an ivory white and gold dress with thin straps and a boisterous skirt that had the silhouettes of delicate flowers embroidered into it. She was nothing short of the beautiful little princess she was budding into. White wasn't a wise choice in Zidane's opinion, though. There'd be chocolates and punch on it before sunset.

On the far end of the beautiful and patiently awaiting crowd, however, stood the survivor of the journey: Princess Arabella. Her chin-length black hair had been cleaned and it glistened with the onyx sheen her own mother had. Two pearl clips were affixed on either side of her bangs and she wore a dark purple silky dress with long puffy and sparkling sleeves. Affixed around her neck was a linen sling and her right arm hung at her chest. Color had returned to her rosy cheeks and for the first time in awhile, she was genuinely smiling up at her father with her large, dark eyes. He gazed down towards her, a feeling of pride swelling his heart as the gentle breeze brushed her hair against her neck.

This was how it was supposed to be, Zidane told himself. This is what Dagger had intended.

The King made his approach to descend the stairs. Beatrix and Steiner stood at the base, drawing their units to order. The swords drew out in a wave on either sides of the foyer, saluting the King as he came to approach his daughter's and most honored guest. Together, Arabella and Sarah curtsied. Alex's curls beat against her head as she looked to them both before doing a klutzy bend at her knees. Dante came to a kneel as Zidane reached the bottom.

“Stand up, all of you,” Zidane waved his hands. “We share this special day together.”

“But I’m the guest of honor!” Alex declared, her tail waving excitedly behind her.

“We all yield that position to you, princess,” Zidane nodded. ‘All I know is that today marks a new chapter for this family.’ He brought his arms out and enveloped his daughter’s. “Things are going to change for the better. There’s no more being frightened or frustrated. There’s no changing what has happened.”

“Oh, Daddy, I’ll miss you when I leave next week,” Sarah said, tilting her head. “I promise I’ll write at every destination.”

“And you’ll return to me the Queen you always wanted to be,” Zidane kissed her forehead. ‘Little Monkey, today’s your day to be spoiled. Ten years old is quite the feat. I won’t even ask if you brushed your teeth tomorrow morning.’ Alex giggled at the thought, already imagining the evening she’d have, like she was destined for something great as Sarah had encountered on her own birthday gala last year. “And Bella...” Zidane gently reached towards her, grazing her cheek. “I love you so much, sweetheart. Thank you for everything you’ve done...” His

daughter's wrapped their arms around him like a tangled spiderweb. His heart was thudding in his chest as he looked over their heads all pushed together to give him their warmest hug. He never could have imagined himself here. In some ways, his old life didn't feel so long ago, but in other ways, it seemed like another lifetime. But he would never change a thing about anything that it was today. Sarah. Arabella, and Alexandra had changed his life for the much better, Zidane knew. Ten years was far too short with Queen Garnet but with his daughters, he was growing to understand, that he really hadn't lost any time at all with her. Garnet shined inside of each child, despite who they took after. All three of them were an embodiment of her, their own phase of her, as if she were the moon. He wrapped his arms around the huddled group with the warmth of love. He could never see life another way without them. They each had a part of him and he would always be thankful to have these girl's. There was no life, Zidane was convinced, without Sarah, Arabella, and Alexandra.

The women of Alexandria fanned themselves beneath the mild Spring sun and gawked their heads

to see towards the courtyard of the entrance of the Alexandrian Castle. Squad Beatrix and the Knights of Pluto surrounded each half of the spacious courtyard reserved strictly for Royalty use. Alex, Bella, and Sarah stood to one side of the circular stonework, Beatrix, Steiner, and Doctor Tot just opposite. Up front, Dante's family stood. His mother and sister's were starstruck by the whole ordeal. Dante's father seemed full of pride. In the center of the plaza with the gray stones arranged to portray a crystal stood Zidane and Dante, standing side by side. Zidane's heart hammered in his chest. He turned to Dante, pressing a hand to his shoulder. The young man promptly knelt and a hush came over the gathered crowd. Zidane brought his hand to the hilt of the sword attached at his hip. Countless leaders of Alexandria had held it. Legend had it, the sword was forged on the completion day of the Alexandrian Castle's construction. Now, it was beneath his palm, the rigid and fading tape work on the handle grinding against Zidane's skin.

“Today,” Zidane’s voice was steady and he squared his shoulders, focusing on the top of Dante’s knelt head. ‘Alexandria recognizes a new hero in the sea of faces we have come to know and celebrate. It is my grandest honor to present you with this holy

title, for you have, personally, saved my life countless times. The Royal Family would not be here today if not for you... Sir Dante Bare of Alexandria, I dub thee Lord Dante; stand up as a knight, in the name of this throne: Lord Dante Bare of Alexandros.' He brought the sword to each shoulder before offering his hand to Dante. The young man grinned and accepted it, coming to stand beside the King. Zidane hoisted the sword into the air with the sun beating against the freshly polished steel and the delicate cherry blossoms flurrying around it. Hoots, hollers, trumpets, kazoos, and claps resounding in the courtyard. Flower petals were launched upwards and the drummer of the band ragged out a beat. But after a moment, Zidane raised his hand and stepped forward. The crowd hushed for a moment, some freezing in the swing of their dance moves. "There's another reason we're here, however, and I think someone may have a case for why it's more important than this. The tenth birthday of Princess Alexandra."

The youngest heir wasted no time scampering forward, her sandals beating against the cobblestone. They loved the attention and stood in front of her father on the stairs, twirling her skirt around and she was drenched in coos from the women. Zidane

couldn't help but laugh, pressing a hand to her shoulder. "I think the band should strike up a tune. Free drinks, free food, let us celebrate the grand occasion Alexandria is experiencing today. The growth of a wonderful princess and recognizing of an amazing hero. Thank you for being here today."

The crowd wasted no time breaking back out into dance and song and throwing confetti and rose petals. Already glasses were clanking together and champagne was foaming onto the cobblestone. It lifted Zidane's heart to see. The people of Alexandria could be happy again after several tense months. Some people had even moved away, fearing of Alexandria's demolition yet again. But today, his people celebrated before him, they accepted him. Zidane realized he was simply smiling off into the distance and grabbed Dante by his shoulder, having to shout over the abundance of noise. "Why don't you dance with Sarah? Kick off the fun-filled adventure now, huh?"

Dante grinned and held his hand out to Sarah. She knew and was almost magnetically compelled towards him. They linked arms and Sarah blew her father a kiss as they went down the stairs to join in the drinks and hoots resounding across the river.

Alex looked at her father. “Was the garden table placed where I wanted?”

“Yeah, the little secluded area on the water in the far east garden, why?” Zidane furrowed his brow.

“That’s where I wrote for my friends to meet me!” Alex grinned. “On the invitation! We’re going to duel and then I’m gonna make ’em all dance!” Before Zidane could even reply, she had taken off in her lightning speed fashion. Zidane was glad she wasn’t a toddler anymore. Catching her before she took a spill down the staircase was the ultimate challenge of fatherhood. She was the only baby that could run as soon as she walked. And just like that, she was gone, tail trailing, to go have a card game in the garden.

Zidane turned now to spy Bella, still dawdling in the courtyard. He pursed his lips and put his hands in his pockets, strolling towards her. “Hey, how’s your neck?” He asked. “Maybe we could find you a seat so you could take it off for a bit? Eiko said it was good to move it every now and then.”

“No, it’s fine,” Bella said, gripping the sling. “There’s just a lot of people down there and I feel like I hadn’t seen a lot people for a long time. It’s somewhat... unnerving.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Zidane stood beside Bella and together they gazed down on the ruckus taking place on the waterfront. ‘It’s the inertia of a journey ending. You don’t think it ever will, but when it does, it hits you full force.’ He sighed, shuffling his feet. “Everybody’s always part of something that they think will never end... but of course, like all things, it will... and it does. Nothing is forever, Bella... just remember that. Good or bad.”

“You know what...” Bella looked to her father, arching her eyebrows. “We should dance, Daddy.”

“You want to dance with me?”

“If nothing lasts forever, shouldn’t we enjoy it while we have it?” Bella turned to him. “I think I can still dance with just one arm.”

Zidane grinned, linking with her left arm. “Then let’s dance, pumpkin.”

The party continued on with energy even as the sun began to cast a beautiful sherbet sunset across the skies. Candles were lit on the tables and the chefs had brought out roasted chickens and seared

pig. Bella and Zidane had spun around the dance floor for quite a while before they found themselves resting at a table nestled against the hedges. Across the courtyard, Beatrix stood just out of the torch light from the party. She gazed towards the river, watching as it grew darker with the waning day. Here she was again, like nothing had happened. It was nearly *deja vu* for her. Another party, just another day. Everyone was here. Everyone was happy. Was it really that simple? Was she over thinking it? In the past, she had almost been used to a foreign threat or tensity that lead to violence. It had been like daily life. Nearly twenty years of peace, tranquility, and prosperity in Alexandria had changed Beatrix. It scared her to think that anything like her past was now jarring to her. It scorned her perfectionist mindset to know she felt like she couldn't handle it.

"Beatrix, there you are," She looked over her shoulder to see none other than Steiner, emerging from the plaza. In his hand, he held two flute glasses bubbling with champagne. He offered one out to her. She was slow to take it into her hands. "I think there's a toast in order for both of us. For me, I'm going to drink to the fact we all came back. What about you?"

Beatrix was quiet as she watched the bubbles of champagne. Slowly, she cast her dark eyes towards him. She couldn't help but smile when she saw his face. He tried so hard to make her happy. She hoped he knew his efforts were seen. "I'll drink to our companionship... to our love, Steiner." He blushed, of course, but still his big grin plastered his face. Together, they gently chimed their glasses together and drank, watching the ripples across the river. "I don't want you to think I'm unhappy or that I'm compromising... because I'm not. I thought I should say that."

"I just want you to be happy," Steiner tilted his helmet back, spying the two moons destined to collide breaking over the rigid mountain range.

"What about you, Steiner?" Beatrix asked. "It's always about me, me, me. Are you happy? Is this what you want?"

"To be in Alexandria, at the castle, yes," Steiner nodded. 'I can't imagine another life.' He paused for a moment before drawing himself up straight and looking at Beatrix. "And... if we're going to have a child, I want it to be raised here."

Beatrix grinned. "That took you a lot of guts to say, I can tell." Steiner blushed furiously and Beatrix

couldn't help but laugh. "So... you would want to have a child? Be honest."

"With you? Of course I want to," Steiner nodded. "Now that Alex is ten, I kind of miss the sound young children darting around the castle. It makes it feel so much more alive... authentic."

"Then... cheers to that," Beatrix lifted her glass. Steiner followed in suit.

Back through the throngs of people, Sarah came from the dance floor, some wisps of blond hair now framing her face. "Bella, let's dance!" Sarah's eyes were lit up in jubilation. "Just one dance with your big sister, what do you say?" Bella grinned and held her good arm out. Sarah wasted no time whisking her onto the fast paced dance floor. Bag pipes now echoed across the spacious courtyards. Alexandria would be doing no sleeping that night. Once the other dancer's noticed the princesses, they hoisted the duo into the center of the dance floor and everyone danced in fluttery circles around them. Zidane clapped along and for the first time in his life, he was not preoccupied with any other thoughts. He only focused on how happy his girl's were as they spun in silly circles.

I hope you're proud, Dagger... I hope this is what you expected of me.

“Zidane,” Eiko appeared at his side and he nearly leapt from his seat. Eiko grinned, grabbing hold of his arm. “Come on, let’s join the fun. You’ll dance with a Lady like me, won’t you?”

“Why not?” Zidane shrugged, rising from his stool. Together, they joined the outskirts of the jumping crowd, situating themselves on the waterfront by the stairs. Eiko wrapped her arms around Zidane’s neck and they also began tilting in circles. ‘You know,’ Zidane glanced around them as they brushed past other couples. “There are plenty of suitors here who would probably be dying to dance with you. Why not give them a chance instead of dancing with an old king?”

“Bored of me already?” Eiko grinned, turning her head coyly at him. “I don’t wish to dance with any of them. I want to dance with you.”

“Your old man’s not going to give you good grace for many more years,” Zidane warned.

“None of them interest me,” Eiko protested, her braid beating against her back with their movement. “I don’t want any of them. It may be foolish to say

and I don't care if it makes me one, but I love you, Zidane. Wholly, thoroughly..."

"Eiko," Zidane shook his head. "You know I love you in a different way."

"I know. Maybe I'm content with the friendly love we share."

"Look at all these people, though," Zidane replied. "You're telling me there's not a single person on this world who could ever kindle an interest within you? I'm convinced there's someone out there for everyone. It'd be a waste, Eiko, to spend your entire life pining over a heartsick person like myself. I had my shot at love. Give yourself an actual chance, alright?"

Eiko could only smile, glancing to the stars that now littered the sky. The couple slowly came to a stop from dancing. The Princess of Lindblum brought her hands up to cup his cheeks. "You have no idea who you're talking to," She whispered before she leaned forward, placing a soft but tender kiss on his lips. It didn't last long, only a few seconds, before she pulled away. "You are my hero, Zidane. You always will be. Never forget who you are... and never forget why you're here, alright?" She smiled and gestured towards the center of the

crowd. Alex had joined her sister's and they basked in the center of attention with their pearly grins and miscalculated steps.

"Yeah..." Zidane smiled, putting his hands in his pockets. He simply observed his daughter's, watching the way they swung around each other, breaking into ferocious giggles. "It was the test of fatherhood... but it was worth it. Every single thing I've had to do leading up to this exact moment was worth it, Eiko." Zidane found himself compelled forward in the next moment, not even waiting to hear Eiko's response. As the crowd noticed him, they parted quickly. Beneath the candlelight, his daughter's stopped dancing to grin and welcome him into their space. Zidane smiled proudly at them in their shimmering gowns and bright eyes. The family came together in a tight young and Zidane placed a kiss to each of their heads. Clapping rang out and from the balustrades above, Beatrix and Steiner held their swords out towards the glossy moonlight in a respectable salute. Champagne corks popped and the women threw the last of their flower petal baskets into the air. Together, Zidane and his daughter's laughed, shielding themselves from the mist of champagne foam.

“Look!” Bella pointed upwards and the family gawked their heads back. “A shooting star!” It was bright as it twinkled across the sky. It disappeared behind the mountain range.

“Wow, so beautiful!” Sarah gasped.

Zidane only found himself grinning at the sky.

Thank you, Dagger.

The End

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